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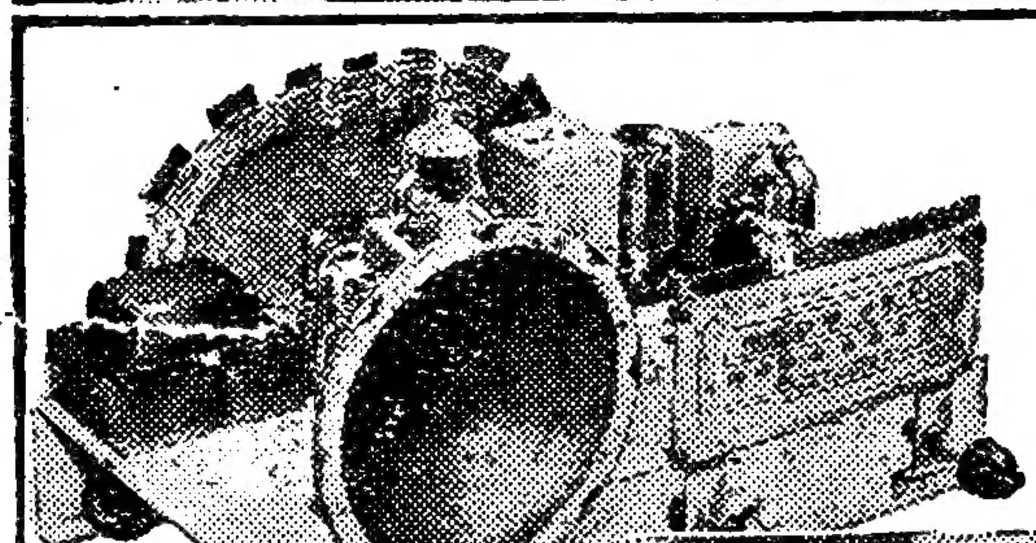

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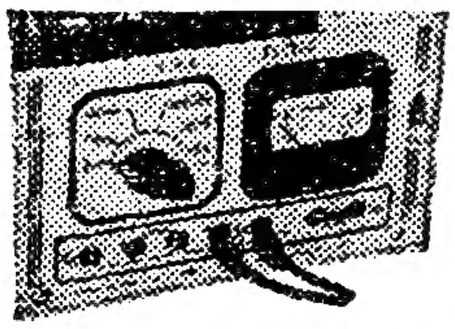

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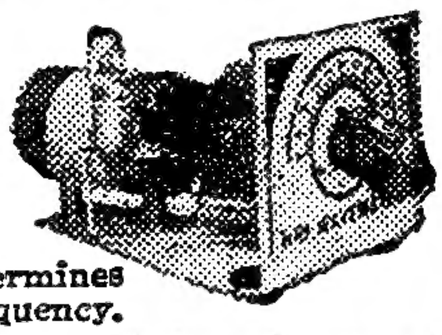

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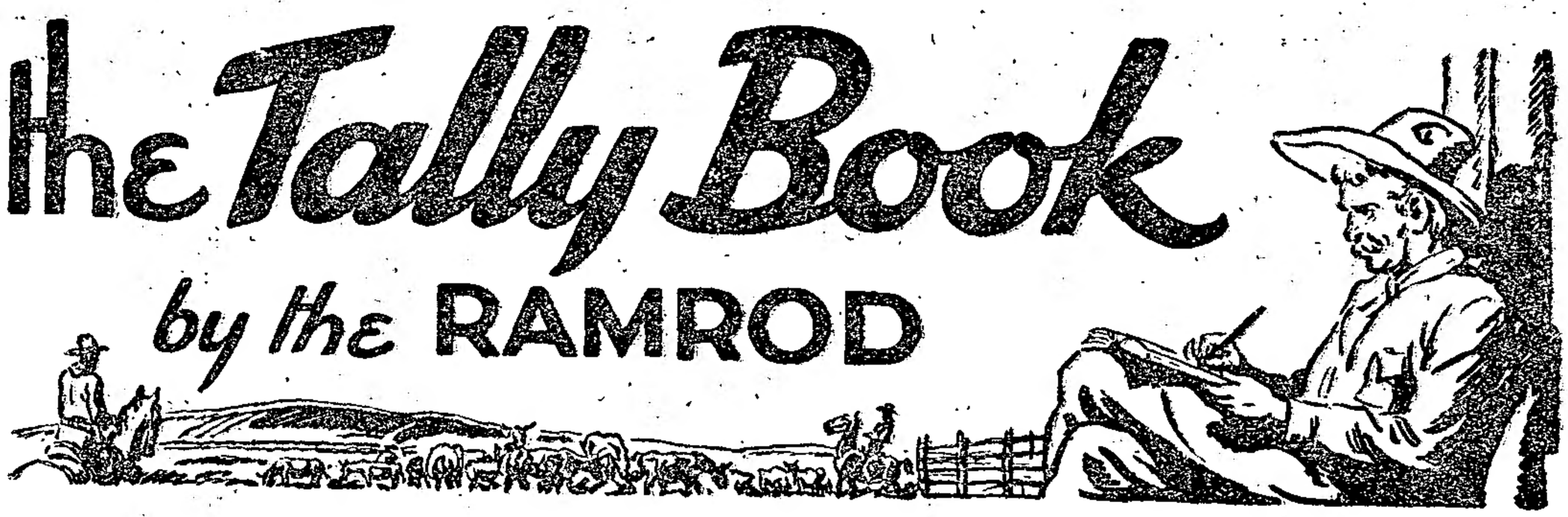
the Tally Book

by the RAMROD



A DEPARTMENT WHERE ALL HANDS GET TOGETHER TO RIDE HERD ON THE WESTERN FICTION ROUNDUP

EVER stop to think how the relatives of outlaws or criminals feel? I mean the honest ones, of course, the ones who feel the brand of shame and the distrust of their neighbors.

Suppose Billy The Kid had had a brother—a decent, fine youngster who was no gunman, no killer, and yet found himself in the terrible dilemma of facing the world as an honest man, but unable to disown his own brother.

This idea has long fascinated Paul Evan Lehman, one of our top-ranking Western writers. And after packing this idea around on his saddle for a long time, he had to get it off his chest, so he sat down and wrote a mighty fine book which he called THE BROTHER OF THE KID. Soon as your old Ramrod heard about it, he just up and snared us this book for GIANT WESTERN. So you'll be seeing it in our next issue.

No Punches Are Pulled!

It isn't about the real BILLY THE KID. No mention is ever made of William Bonney's having a brother. Lehman just starts with the situation which the Kid's life suggested to him: how does an innocent family of a killer suffer from the things the killer does? And he has come up with one of the strongest, most powerful pieces of Western writing we've ever published.

Remember Bill Hopson's TALLY THE LONG YEARS? In some ways this book will remind you of that. There's the same tough, straight-from-the-shoulder style, the same honest reporting. Lehman pulls no punches.

There was the time, for example, after the outlaw, William Lawson, called The Kid, had escaped. His seventeen-year-old brother Jimmie went to town for the week's supplies.

On the steps of Culpepper's general store he met Dave Culpepper, two years older and bigger, a boy who had twice licked Jimmie because of the Kid.

"You can't come in. Beat it," Dave said.

"Why not?" Jimmie demanded.

"Because you can't. We're not selling to the kin of a killer."

"Pop sent me for supplies and this is the only store in town. I'm payin' cash and you got no right to refuse me."

The Spur of Hate

Dave flipped the broom and sent the trash flying into Jim's face. The dirt blinded him momentarily, but not for long. He charged upward and was met by the broom in the chest. Then both boys were tangling, fighting savagely. But friends of Dave rushed to join the battle. One leaped on Jim's back and locked his arms about the boy's throat. Another hit him in the face. A third came in to deliver a savage kick in the ribs. They flattened him to the sidewalk.

Jimmie would have taken a bad beating had not Sheriff Payne broken it up. But that was only the beginning. The hate and suspicion of the townsfolk drove Jim Lawson like a spur. When the

(Continued on page 8)

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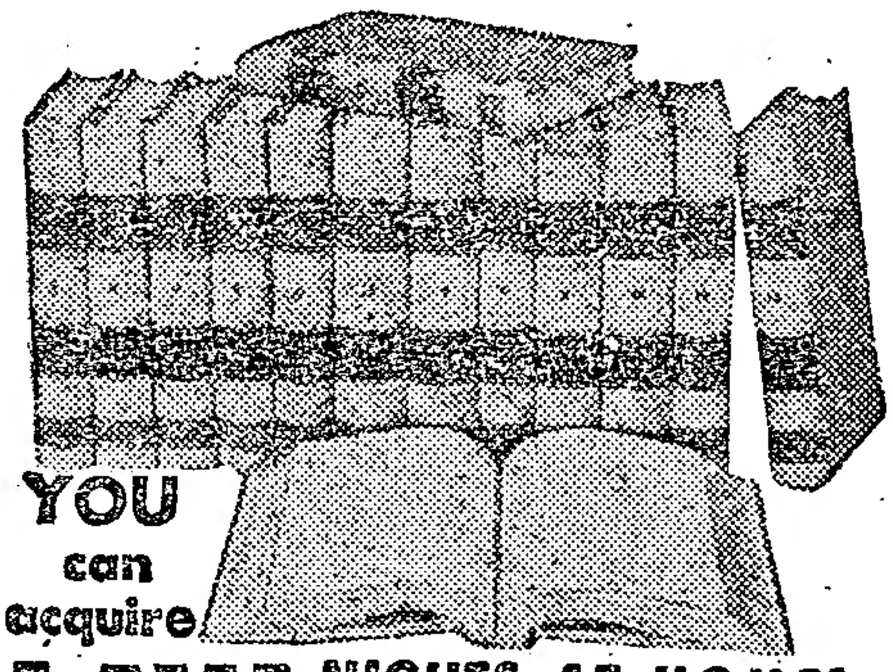

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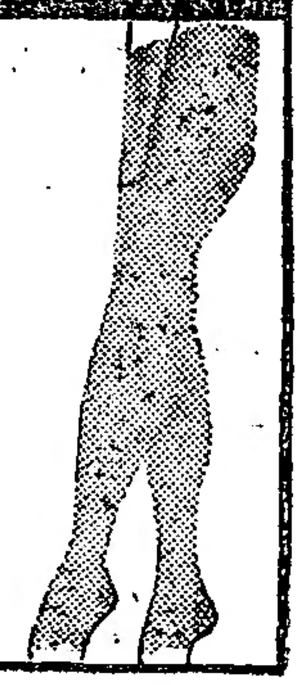

THE TALLY BOOK

(Continued from page 6)

Kid came home to see his folks and Sheriff Payne made a surprise raid on the house, Jim helped the Kid escape. What else could he do—let them catch his own brother?

And that night catastrophe struck. They heard stealthy noises outside, but thought it was only some members of the posse searching for the Kid—until the flames began to crackle. Then they jumped up to find the whole place on fire. It was too late to save anything. The Lawsons gathered their cattle and moved on.

"But we'll be comin' back," Jim told Nancy, his childhood sweetheart. "This is our land and we're coming back."

How many bitter battles lay between the words and the fulfillment, Jim Lawson did not know. His destiny was tied, despite himself to the destiny of his brother. And Fate, which has no pity for poor bedeviled mortals, bore down.

All we got to say, friends, is that this novel, THE BROTHER OF THE KID, is a rip-snorter. Read it yourself and if you don't agree, you write me a mean old letter. But I'm betting you won't!

A Cattle Country Novelet

The novelet for the same issue is THE WAGES OF GREED, by Norrell Gregory. This is a real old time cattleman story, with the sounds and smells and sights of the cow ranch.

Lee Mundy lived next door to the Indian reservation, so to speak, and he knew what a tough time the Indians were having on scanty government rations and with a cold Dakota winter howling outside. So when Little Gobbler came over to his place and told him that the beef herd they'd been waiting for hadn't arrived, Lee knew how cold and hungry the Indians must be. It took a lot to make an Indian complain.

Lee also knew that the Indian agent was cheating and robbing his wards and he had about made up his mind to do something about it.

A storm roared in next day from the Badlands and with that, Lee knew that there was no chance of the Indians'

(Continued on page 159)

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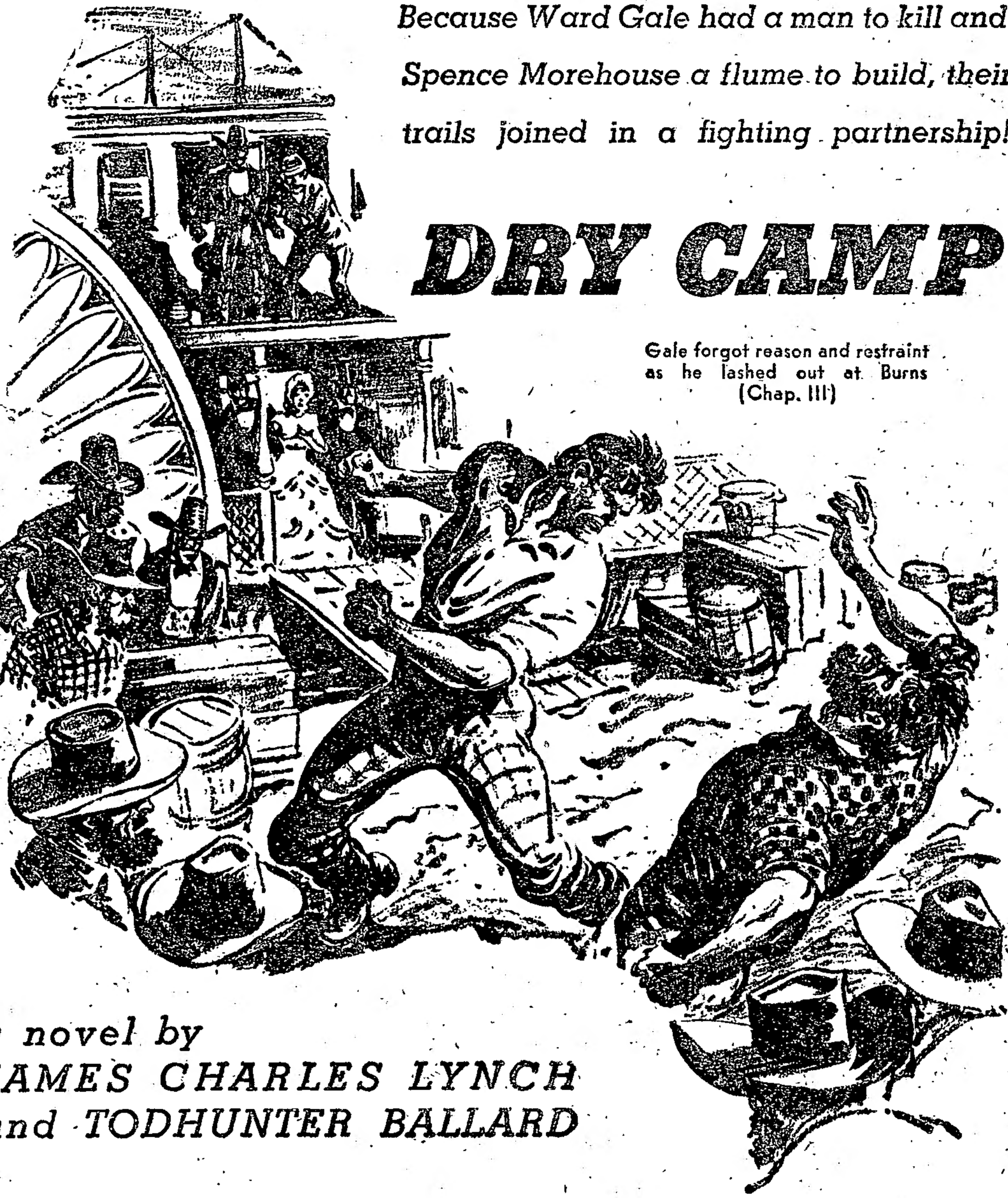
Because Ward Gale had a man to kill and Spence Morehouse a flume to build, their trails joined in a fighting partnership!

DRY CAMP



Gale forgot reason and restraint as he lashed out at Burns (Chap. III)

a novel by
JAMES CHARLES LYNCH
and TODHUNTER BALLARD

I

AT SUNSET the ship had anchored in San Francisco Bay giving Captain Ward Gale his first look at that fabulous city, its shacks and its tents crawling up the steep hills from the water's edge. Here was the gateway to the gold fields of California. And this was the hour Gale had to decide how much longer he wanted to live.

Young and rangy, a man of strength and temper and big appetites and the will to control them, his natural bent was for the company of congenial men, but now he kept off to himself. Huddled in his greatcoat, he walked the boat's dark waist, pausing occasionally at the after break to look up at the ship's master pacing slowly back and forth

and to remember his own lonely watches on other quarter decks. This was the first long voyage Gale had ever made as passenger.

As they had rounded up and dropped the hook, night had come and a thick, muzzling fog had closed in. The master, concerned and conscious of the Bay's dangers, cluttered as it was with abandoned shipping, had refused to land them until morning.

That was all right with Gale, but the rest of the passengers had come to dig gold. The impatience in them made hours out of minutes and kept them milling restlessly about the deck. And just when they had reconciled themselves to wait, a boatman had come out, offering them a chance to get ashore. Sitting straddle of the ship's rail, his left arm hooked through the bail of his guttering lantern, he stirred them up.

"Thirty-five dollars," he chanted. "Thirty-five dollars a man with what baggage he can lift. I can take two. Step up, gents. Plenty of rich claims right out of town, but you'll have to hurry. First ones ashore will get the best."

To the passengers, their eager minds inflamed by legends they themselves had invented out of the meager details that had sent them west, the boatman's words held no absurdities. But some were already short of funds.

"Thirty-five dollars?" said a gaunt man. "That's a lot of money for a mile boat ride."

"Rich claims ain't going to last," the boatman said. "Men are pouring in. Tomorrow or the day after, those who come will have to pan and dig for it. Ground with gold lyin' in sight is gettin' scarce."

They hesitated, looking at one another. Then one pressed forward and the whole crowd moved. Gale was caught up by their urgency. Why not settle it tonight?

He drove his hard body carelessly through the crowd. They cursed him, but they got out of his way. He was too big for anyone to block and this sudden opportunity had robbed the group of any cohesion.

Gale shoved the last man aside and dropped a stack of coins into the boatman's greasy palm. "Here's a hundred," he said. "I'll go alone."

"Done." The boatman dropped quickly over the side.

GALE was after him, climbing the ladder downward toward the bobbing skiff. A pistol slipped halfway from his coat pocket. He caught it, quickly, shoving it back. But the boatman had seen it and his dirty, stubbled face showed unease as Gale dropped into the bottom of the boat.

"Where's your baggage?" the boatman said, stalling. "You forgot it."

"Let's go," said Gale.

Above them the faces at the rail were envious and resentful and no one called good-by. No friendships had been severed. Through the long voyage, Gale had kept his trouble to himself.

When the skiff pushed away from the ship, Gale and the boatman were alone, walled in by the settling fog. Gale knew the sea too well to feel lost, but this could be serious. He sat facing the stern where the boatman stood erect and pushed his oars.

"You going to have trouble finding shore in this?"

"No," the boatman said. "Once you get San Francisco mud in your hair, you can smell it clean across the Bay. I foller my nose."

"So that's what it is," said Gale. "I thought it was gold I was smelling."

The boatman gave him an uneasy look. "You didn't swallow too much of my gab, did you, Red?"

"No," said Gale.

The man was still uneasy. "A good claim could be a mite farther out than I mentioned."

Gale smiled a little. "Stop worrying about the gun you saw. I'm not interested in gold."

"A man never knows," the boatman said. "To be honest, there ain't no gold right around San Francisco. In fact, since you ain't interested, I guess I can tell you it's a far piece out. And there ain't much layin' on top the ground, either. I didn't find any. You come here on business, did you?"

"Yes," said Gale. "Let's call it that."

"Must be important, the hurry you was in. You didn't quibble none on the price, either. Maybe I can help you."

"Maybe you can," said Gale. "Ever hear of a man named Roberts? Matt Roberts?"

"Captain Roberts? Sure. Everybody in California knows him. He a friend of yours?"

"I know him well. What happened to the ship he sailed? *The Witch.*"

"He sold the cargo," said the man. "Then he sold the ship to Sam Brannan. Sam beached her. *The Witch* is a hotel now. Roberts is doing all right, too.

WARD GALE

He owns a big chunk of the country."

"So I've heard," murmured Gale. "Will I find him in San Francisco?"

The boatman shook his head. "Not tonight. His new river packet, the *Cornucopia*, is making her first run. Matt will be aboard. I saw him heading for the Embarcadero."

"An extra fifty," said Gale, quickly, "if you get me ashore before that packet leaves."

The boatman spat over the side. "Now that's my luck. She's left. I heard her whistle a spell back."

Gale swore under his breath. "Put me aboard her."

"Pretty risky in this fog."

"A hundred dollars risky?"

The boatman grinned, altering his course. "A hundred dollars easy. With this fog they won't be running fast. You must have important business with Roberts."

"I have," said Gale. "I'm going to kill him."

The boatman stopped rowing. "Kill Captain Roberts? Why, Red, he's a big important man. They'll hang you for that."

"I suppose so," said Gale. "That's why I didn't bring any baggage."

THE CORNUCOPIA, newest and finest of the Roberts' San Joaquin river steamers, pushed swiftly through the fog toward Chipps Island and New York Slough, forty-five miles away. Gale saw her first. Her two high lights came out of the night with startling suddenness. He shouted his warning and the boatman turned, voicing his own fears.

"My gosh, she's coming fast!"

He dropped his oars and snatched up the lantern, waving it frantically. "Hey!" he yelled. "Ahoy!"

Gale stood up. The packet's sharp, rising bow loomed incredibly over them, throwing a high, white wave right and left. It struck, cutting the skiff in two.

Gale, from his standing position, was hurled head first into the water. The weight of his great coat and the heft of the big pistols in his pockets dragged him deep. The cold water shocked the breath out of him.

Instinct made him fight up toward the surface and he came against the packet's bottom and was rolled over and over by the suction of the steamer's thirty-five foot paddle wheels. He plunged down again until his head pounded with the beat of his own pulse and he knew he had to have air or die.

The soaked heaviness of his coat hampered him and he tore desperately at the fastenings, ripping them free and fighting out of it. Thus lightened he shot to the surface, his head breaking through the crest of a heaving swell.

He gulped down air, tasting it, the salty fog flavor and the strong tang of vegetation dying along the tidal flats. Land tastes. Then he turned over, looking for help, for something to cling to.

The streamer seemed far away, her paddles slowing, their beat still audible and just now stopping.

"Wait!" he shouted. "Help!" The fog diffused the sounds he made, sending

them back against his own ears.

Realizing he could not be heard, he started swimming with long, overhand strokes, seeing lanterns begin to wink on the steamer's engine deck, hearing the muffled, confused shouting of those aboard the boat.

The swim seemed endless; he had the illusion the steamer still moved or was poised to escape him. He redoubled his efforts. He had no fear of the water, but he had come too close to Matt Roberts to let him get away now.

Gale almost failed. As he came up to the stern and seized a trailing rope, signal bells jangled and the steamer started into motion, the wash forcing him back. The rope pulled taut. The small man holding it was jerked hard against the rail.

He let out a startled yell. The lantern in his other hand sailed out to hiss into the water beside Gale's head.

"Hang on!" Gale yelled. "Hang on!"

The rope slackened sickeningly, then tightened with a snap, almost loosening Gale's grip. Then the man on deck was shouting, "Help! Somebody lend me a hand."

ABOVE the roiling sound of the gathering wake, Gale heard the pound of feet running on the deck. A harder strain came on the rope. They swung him in against the hull, lifting him from the water with unthinking suddenness. Just as his fingers broke loose from the slippery line hands reached down and grabbed his wrists. He was dragged aboard and held erect.

Gale pulled away from them and leaned back against the rail, drawing his breath in slow, even gasps, trying to quiet his pounding heart. News of the rescue spread and where a second before there had been only a handful of men, they now packed the deck, everyone closing in.

The small man who had held the rope tried to herd them back. "Let him alone," he begged. "Let him get his wind."

"You got the other one all right?" said Gale.

"Other one?" the small man said. "Was someone with you?"

"Sure there was," said Gale, and looked around vainly for an officer. "There were two of us. Let's get this packet stopped."

"You'll play heck doing that," the small man said. "They're out for a record run. The owner's aboard."

"They'll stop," said Gale, and pushed his way through the crowd to the nearest ladder. He swarmed up this to the pilot house, set cube-like on the texas between the tall, twin stacks.

There were two men at the big wheel. On the right hand side of the house a mate stood at the open window peering out into the fog. On the left the captain kept his lookout, his round head thrust aggressively forward.

"Ring her down," said Gale, sharply.

Long used to command, his tone made the mate reach instinctively for the signal cord. He caught himself in time and turned.

The captain swung around, lifting his black beard out of the upturned collar of his coat. His brown eyes, round as marbles and as hard, ranged over Gale in a long, all including look.

"What's the matter with you?" he said.

"You ran down a skiff," Gale told him. "My boatman's not aboard. You going to leave the man out there?"

"What skiff?" the captain said. "And I don't like people running in here and telling me to ring my engines down. Get out of here."

"You going to stop?"

"No," the captain said. "We stopped long enough."

Gale hit him. The man smashed back against the bulkhead, then slipped limply to the floor. Gale dropped on him with his knees, laced his fingers in the man's hair and beard and beat his head against the deck.

Then he straightened quickly, ready for the mate. The mate stood motionless. The two helmsmen had not moved. The little man who had trailed that saving rope astern, stood wedged in the doorway of the pilot house holding back the crowd that had flowed up behind them. In his hand he held a pepperbox, a small but deadly gun.

"Take your time, Red," he said. "No one's going to interfere."

The mate looked at Gale. "It would not do any good to turn back."

"Not now," said Gale. "I guess we'd never find him." He prodded the master with his foot. "But he could have stopped longer."

"He could have," said the mate. "He

was running too fast in the first place. But we have the owner aboard and Captain Hames was out to make a record. He's not going to like you when he wakes up."

"It doesn't matter to me," said Gale. "Where would I find the owner?"

"Don't try," said the mate. "You've had trouble enough for one night. I'll put you in a cabin and you can stay out of sight until we reach Antioch. Then you can go over the side and swim ashore."

"I didn't come this far to swim ashore at a place called Antioch," said Gale.

"I don't give a hoot what you came for," the mate said. "I'll put you in a cabin. After that you can do as you please."

As a bullet whined across the saddle he had just emptied, the horse reared and almost jerked Gale from his feet (Chap. VI)

FOR a long time Gale stood motionless in the middle of the cabin. His energy was completely drained away and his bones ached from exhaustion. Even his desire to find Matt Roberts was momentarily gone.

After the cramped quarters of the sailing vessel this cabin was large and spacious and newly clean. A sperm oil lamp in a gimbaled frame spread its soft light over the glossy whiteness of the walls turning them to warm cream and making the gold leaf decorations glisten.

Against the far wall was a wide, double bunk. To the left a bolted down chest of drawers. To the right a small cabinet held a white bowl and its water pitcher. The floor was covered with soft carpeting and beside the door was a bench.

There was no knock. The cabin door opened and Gale spun around, lifting his hands, aggressively. It was the little man. He held a mug of coffee, smelling

strongly of whiskey, toward Gale.

Against Gale's sinewy bulk this man seemed frail. His features were regular and as delicate as a woman's, but without a woman's softness. His eyes were jet black, narrowed with the habit of mockery and his hair was dark and fine, growing down to a sharp widow's peak on his pale forehead. His mouth, mobile and red, showed quick humor and a fondness for cynicism, nicely balanced between laughter and cruelty.

"Drink this, Red," he said. "It will do you good."

Gale relaxed and took the cup. "Thanks. You've been a lot of help, tonight."

The little man cocked his head and smiled, shyly. "I always like to help an enemy of Matt Roberts."

Gale sipped a little coffee. "Who said I was an enemy of Matt Roberts'?"

"You."

"When?"

"Every time the mate mentioned Matt Roberts. But it's all right with me, Red. My name is Spencer Morehouse. I hate Roberts, too."

"Why?"

"I don't know why. I just hate him."

Gale masked his face with the coffee cup. "You could be mistaken about me."

Morehouse laughed silently. "Not me. I don't make mistakes. I'm a very observing man."

Gale finished the coffee and set the cup on the stand. The heat of the laced liquid ran down through his tired body, lifting and toning it back to normal reaction. His eyes ranged over Morehouse's well cut suit, his white linen and carefully polished boots.

"You going gold hunting in that outfit?"

"In my own way, Red. I never use a shovel or a pan." He came back to the former subject with a persistence Gale found irritating. "What's between you and Roberts?"

"Would that be any of your business?"

"I don't know why not," said Morehouse. "I saved your life. You wouldn't even be here if it weren't for me."

Gale raised his hand to acknowledge the debt and protest the reminder. Morehouse was suddenly four steps away, his pepperbox gleaming in his small hand. Slowly, a sheepish smile crept up into his dark eyes and he put the gun away.

"I beg your pardon," he said. "But when a man moves fast it startles me and you're pretty big."

Gale moved over and sat down on the bench, putting his elbows on his knees and letting his hands dangle. They were big knuckled, a little square and strong without being blunt. Sitting this way, he looked at Morehouse.

"I had a little dog like you, once. All nerves. You a gambler?"

"Me?" said Morehouse. "I never turned a card in my life. Why risk what you've got, to get something you might not get? Why do you hate Roberts, Red?"

GALE said, "Three years ago, in Boston, I borrowed money and built a ship and loaded her and sent her west. My brother sailed as master and my good friend, Matt Roberts, was her mate. One of the crew finally came back home. One night, standing in the dark, he'd seen Roberts smash my brother with a belaying pin and shove him over the rail. Roberts sold ship and cargo as his own. That's how he got his start."

"I can believe it," said Morehouse. "That's Roberts. He's been stealing ever since, too. But if you've come for a settlement, Red, you'll have a hard time getting it. Roberts is too big and rich, now. He's entirely respectable. Beside this packet line, he owns the express run to the southern mines, and the stages. He owns a bank. He's got a hundred men to do his dirty work. You'll never get a dime out of Roberts."

"I don't want anything Roberts has," said Gale. "All I want to do is kill him."

"Kill him?" said Morehouse. "Why?"

Being essentially law abiding, Gale had to have an answer to that question to justify his position and his reason for taking this course. But he had never framed the reason into words. There were too many facets to it and he realized, now, he had simply lumped them together into a thing called hate.

Had he been a devious man, Gale might have gone about this differently, but all of his twenty-seven years he had pointed himself directly at his goals. Now that the need for justice had come he saw no reason to change his ways.

So many people had been hurt by Roberts. Besides Gale's own deep, personal loss, there was the old lady he had boarded with. She had bought a share in the venture. Tim Sullivan, the inn

keeper, had mortgaged his business to help lay the keel of *The Witch*. A hundred homes had felt the pinch of this loss. Peter Gale was dead and he had been too young to die.

He hardly realized he had been speaking aloud until the sound of his slow, solid words beat into his consciousness. ". . . . so there's only one fit punishment for Roberts."

"Punishment, yes," said Morehouse. "But where's the punishment in death? You talk like a child, Ward. Who are you to say death hurts a man? You hit him with a bullet and, perhaps, he's better off than he is now. Who knows? Roberts hurt you and your friends. For that you want to hurt Roberts. But killing him isn't the answer."

Impatience boiled up in Gale. This decision to kill Roberts had been the last step of a mental process too intricately evolved to be turned aside by a stranger's platitudes.

"Words," he said. "Every time a man gets afraid of consequences, he falls back on words. I'm not afraid of the consequences of killing Matt Roberts."

Morehouse shook his head. "You keep missing the point. It's punishment you're working for. Now what will hurt Roberts most?"

"There's nothing a man wants to do more than live."

MOREHOUSE flung his hands wide in disgust. "Where's your judgement? Roberts would risk his life for a thousand dollars. Life isn't what's dear to that man. It's what he owns that counts. A lot of men, who have lost everything, have killed themselves because of it. Use your head. Strip Roberts of everything he owns. Then if you're not satisfied, after punishing him, kill him. But that will only be doing him a favor."

Gale thought around in a circle and came back to the little man's logic. "That sound nice, but Roberts is a rich and powerful man. All I have left is my hands."

"Hands," said Morehouse, holding up his own slim fingers. "Every one has hands. You use them to eat with and wash your face. It's your brains that count, Ward, and they have to be tougher than your fists. You don't have to be a big man to be tough in the head, either."

"Don't you have to be tough in the head to kill a man?"

"No. You just have to sell yourself a bill of goods. How easy was it to make up your mind?"

"Not too hard," said Gale. "A man hits you and you hit him back."

"In anger, yes. But anger cools off. You have to have a better reason after a long wait."

"I have. There's a hundred people who trusted me."

"Ah," said Morehouse. "That's not anger. You're building yourself up to be a martyr for their cause. You're willing to crowd back your ethics and all your training and pull a trigger. What's that get you? Any man can justify himself for one act. All you're doing is posing as an executioner. I know what I'd do if I were in your shoes. But then you probably haven't as much nerve as I have."

"No?" said Gale. "What would you do?"

"As long as I'm forgetting ethics, I'd forget them all. There isn't one thing I wouldn't stoop to do until I'd stripped Matt Roberts of everything he owns. In his case there isn't even any moral issue involved. He has no scruples. He killed your brother and robbed a hundred people to get his start."

Gale tried to fend him off. "What's your interest in this?"

"Beside hating Roberts, let's say I like you. Do you think you're the only man on earth who likes to see justice done?"

Gale shook his head. "There's nothing I can do but kill Roberts. To fight a man with money you have to have money. I haven't enough left to buy a meal."

A glow came into the little man's eyes. "Of course we need money. With money you can do anything. But don't worry about it, Ward. We'll take a quarter million apiece out of Carolina."

"Carolina?"

"It's a town," said Morehouse. "The richest square mile on earth." Excited, he took to pacing the cabin.

"Now get this picture. There are forty thousand men in Carolina, all of them digging gold. But it takes water to wash gold out of gravel. The boys at Carolina will pay anything for water. It's a dry camp. So we'll build them a water ditch. It can be done. The Stanis-

laus River is only five miles away."

"Forty thousand men," said Gale, "and no water to work with?"

"Oh, there's water," said Morehouse. "A man built a five mile ditch. But the richer the claims get, the more he charges for water. By the time the miners pay his water rates, he gets nearly all the gold that's mined."

"Who is he?" asked Gale.

"A man," said Morehouse, "by the name of Matt Roberts. I think you know him."

GALE had lived with his own solution to this problem too long to relinquish it easily. But this was a practical suggestion. He turned it slowly in his mind and unconsciously coupled it with his own desires.

"What would Roberts do if we built a competing ditch?"

"Turn the world upside down to stop us. Recruit a gang of toughs to fight us every inch of the way."

"And if the toughs couldn't stop us, would he come himself?"

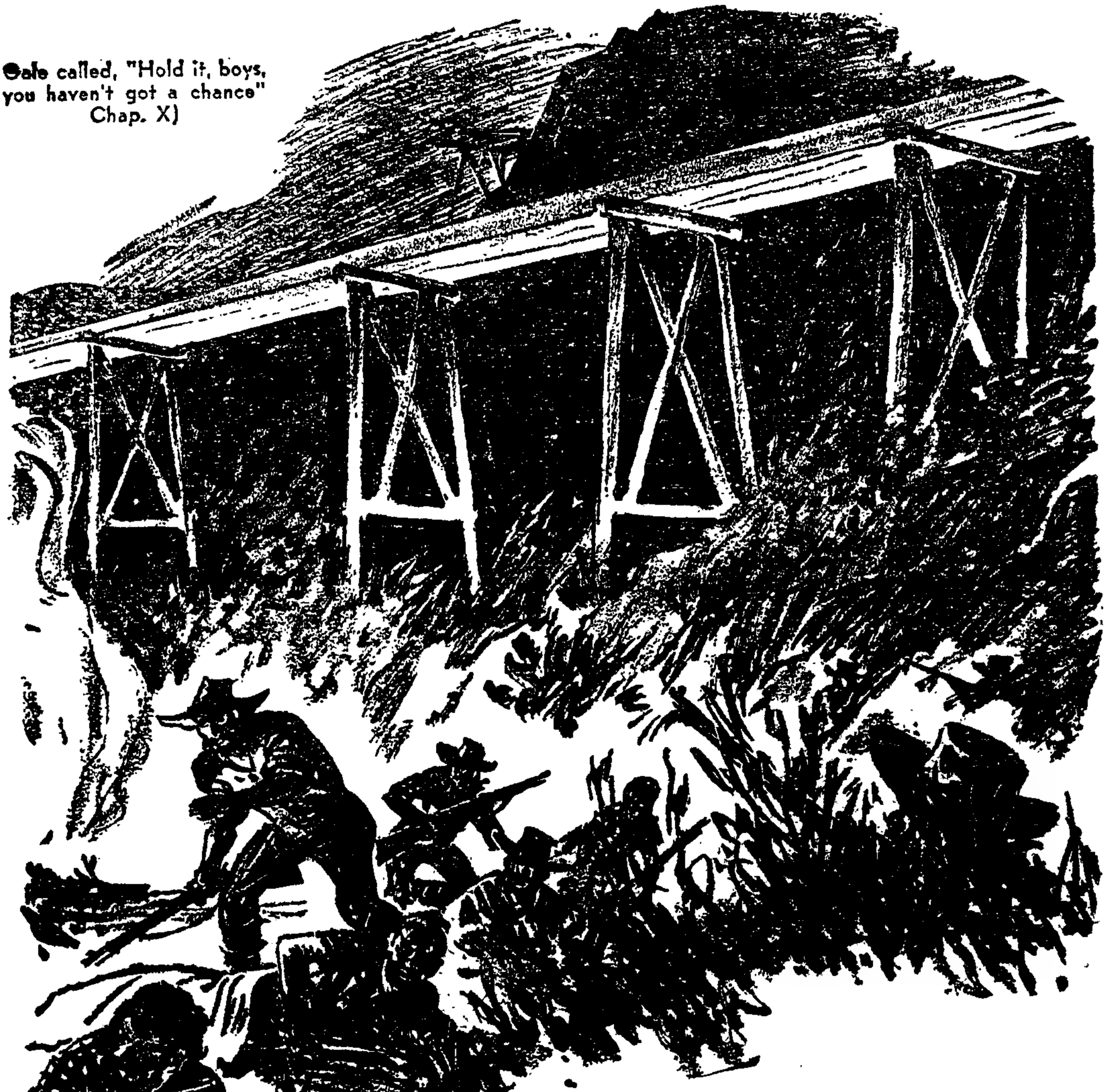
"You're damned right he would. That ditch, without competition, is worth millions to him."

"Good," said Gale. "We'll build a water ditch."

"Now you're talking," said Morehouse. He crossed over and slapped Gale on the shoulder. "Together, we'll handle Roberts, all right. Now let's get some sleep. We'll talk about it in the morning." He shrugged out of his coat and hung it on a hook beside the dresser and then sat down to worry out of his tight boots.

"I didn't know I was butting in," Gale said. "When they showed me this cabin I thought it was vacant."

"Oh, you're not butting in," said



Gale called, "Hold it, boys, you haven't got a chance" Chap. X)

But the mate advised you to jump off at Antioch."

"We'll forget that," said Gale.

"Good," said Morehouse. He slipped off his pants and climbed into the bunk, bouncing on the mattress. "This is luxury. Roberts really put himself out when he built this one."

"It's fancy enough," agreed Gale. Morehouse. "It's not my cabin, either. You think I'd pay Roberts for anything?"

Unembarrassed, he dropped his boots to the floor and rose to thumb his suspenders off his shoulders.

Gale had to laugh. "Incidentally, Spence, where will we be in the morning? Where we heading?"

"That's a good question," said Morehouse. "This boat is going to Stockton. "What do they get for passage to Stockton?"

"Deck passage is eight dollars. I was going to sleep on deck and beat Roberts out of eight dollars. Now I'll sleep in here and beat him out of twenty-five. This bunk's wide enough for both of us." He moved over against the bulkhead and looked at Gale. "Come on and get in. Do your thinking with the light out."

Gale walked over and turned out the light. "See you later," he said, and left the cabin.

OUTSIDE, Gale stepped across the five-foot covered walkway and pushed against the rail. A steady rain was falling, washing the fog away. It seemed darker than ever, yet it was possible now to sense a restraining border against which this sluggish river flowed.

To Gale's right, water slopping from the churning paddle wheels made its constant cascading noise against the wooden wheel guards. The eccentric on the walking beam made its loblolly sound. The hiss of steam, the pressure hum of the boilers, the laboring suction of the pistons, all this blended with the drumming of the rain into a dull, annoying monotone.

It had been months since he had set foot on anything besides a wooden deck and all this was Roberts' fault. Thinking about it made Morehouse's words seem remote and Gale started moving, unconsciously, stumbling over sleeping men who mumbled their protests, being uncomfortable enough in the wet darkness.

When he came to the uncovered bow he paused and looked up at the pilot house. Roberts was not there and Gale moved on, swinging about the other side and into the garish saloon.

Here was light and gaiety and laughter; the smell of tobacco and whiskey; the perfume of women who made these boat trips endlessly. The air here was warm and pungent, the room crowded, but there was no way or desire in him to enjoy it. Roberts was not here, either.

Not until he was out in the darkness again did Gale begin to sense that he felt relieved and to realize how much Morehouse's words had affected him. Unconsciously he had picked up his hunt for Roberts and now he was glad he had failed to find him. Yet, three hours ago, he had paid a hundred dollars to travel a mile for no other purpose.

Wondering about himself, he turned down a passage and walked through a path of light coming from an open cabin door; not realizing what he saw until he was four steps beyond, then turning back.

An old man lay stretched helplessly on the floor beside the cabin berth. A young woman bent over him, her hands beneath his shoulders, trying to lift him. Failing, she turned and picked up the water pitcher. Standing upright, she poured water slowly down upon the man's face. It struck his nose and ran in rivulets down his cheeks and along the white tufts of his beard.

She looked like a mere girl. Her shoulders were boyishly square beneath the green robe she wore belted about her slim waist. Her legs were straight and shapely and long. There was a lithe, quick poise about her and her hair, hanging loose, was almost the same red shade as Gale's own, with a long, natural wave that made the disorder of it more beautiful than any symmetry of careful attention.

Gale took a half step into the cabin. "Can I do anything?"

She looked up startled and said, "Oh!" and he had his first full view of her face. Her brow was high and attractive, her eyes wide spaced and sea green. Her lips, under a straight and stubborn nose were red and warm, a trifle sulky now with a mixture of anger and pity.

"My father's drunk," she said. "I'm trying to get him into bed."

Gale stooped and swung the man up, propping him on the bunk. Deftly, he held the lolling head with one hand while he stripped off the coat and wet shirt with the other. When the girl had pulled off the man's boots, Gale let the frail body collapse. Covering him with blankets, he stepped back.

When the silence grew awkward, the girl said, "Thank you. I couldn't lift him alone."

"Glad to help," said Gale, and was embarrassed for her and the man on the bunk.

Looking at him she sensed this and had her own embarrassment. "He's a good man," she said, defensively. "He doesn't do this often and never deliberately."

"It's all right," said Gale, trying to put her at her ease.

SHE studied him again, his coatlessness, his still damp, wrinkled pants and his tousled hair and came to a decision. "If you want to," she said, "you can stay here in the cabin with my father. I think you'll find that better than sleeping on a wet deck. There

won't be any trouble about it."

If he could have seen fit to put a woman into the pattern of his future he would have spoken to her more kindly. But he was already committed, one way or another, to something in which a woman had no part.

"No thanks," he said, and turned to leave.

"Wait," she said. "I'm sorry if I offended you. From the looks of you I thought you could use a little help, but maybe you've already made your strike."

He turned back, smiling a little. "No. I'm not a miner."

Having spent her whole life among men, she had always been able to put each in his own category, but there was something about Gale she could not place. Uninhibited, she put her natural curiosity into words. "Then who are you? What do you hope to do in California?"

Gale wondered how she would react if he told her he had come to kill a man. The thought turned him a little grim, but he could not tell her the truth. Yet something had to be said to satisfy her.

"I'm going to a town called Carolina, to build a water ditch."

"Carolina?" she said. "There's already a water ditch in Carolina."

"Run by a thief," said Gale.

She moved back a little, color running up into her cheeks. "Who have you been talking to? My father?"

"No," said Gale, and was surprised. "A man named Spencer Morehouse."

She moved on back to the cabinet and caught up the water pitcher, so stiff with anger the grace had gone out of her. Hotly, she said, "So you're tied up with that swindler," and hurled the pitcher at Gale's head.

Gale's reflexes made him jerk aside. The pitcher struck the door jamb, shattering and showering the carpet with slivers of white crockery; the force of it could have brained him.

Reacting, without thinking, he leaped forward, catching her wrists. She fought, savagely, trying to strike his face.

Gale pulled her close against him, smothering her movements with his body and twisting her arms behind her.

Her face was turned up toward him, her lips made redder and warmer now, by anger, but inches from his own. It had been a long time since he had kissed a woman. He bent down and pressed his own lips against her mouth.

She strained against him, swaying from side to side, testing her strength to the limit. When it failed, she went limp.

Gale held her a moment longer, then pushed her back. The fire, deep in her green eyes, was bitter. She scrubbed a fist across her mouth and said, "I should have expected that from a friend of Spencer Morehouse. Now get out!"

II

MOVING down the outside walkway, Gale stopped. His mind had been on the girl, but he forgot her now and stood poised, the muscles across his back crawling and tightening. Someone was opening the door of the cabin where Morehouse slept. For an instant, Gale thought it might be Roberts. Then the man, not going further into the cabin, spoke. It was the mate.

"Gale! Gale!"

Before Gale could answer, Morehouse said, "Yes?" his voice pitched deep.

"Antioch coming up in half an hour," the mate said. "Be ready to drop off the stern."

"Good," said Morehouse. "How's Hames?"

"You dang near killed him." There was a lurking satisfaction in the mate's voice. "He had it coming, too, or I wouldn't be doing you this favor. Don't make a big splash when you go. If Hames thought he could get you, he'd run this bucket ashore, trying."

"I won't make a sound," said Morehouse.

"Good luck," said the mate, and walked toward the stern, away from Gale.

Gale let him go and continued to stand there waiting to see if Morehouse would come out to find him. When the little man did not appear, Gale let himself quietly into the cabin.

Crossing the floor, he felt the pockets of Morehouse's coat, searching for the small gun. It was not there.

Gale lit the lamp and moved over to the bunk. Morehouse's eyes were closed and his even breathing simulated sleep, but Gale was certain the small man was awake. Seizing his arm, he hauled

Morehouse into a sitting position.

The little man squalled. "That's a heck of a way to wake a man. Where have you been? I've been looking all over for you."

"Have you?"

"Yes, the mate was here, wanting you to get off at Antioch. Now we've passed the place. You might as well come to bed."

"You're a liar," said Gale. "I was outside when the mate spoke to you. You didn't even make a try to find me and we haven't gotten to Antioch, yet."

Morehouse hunched his shoulders under the covers. "All right," he admitted, cheerfully. "I'm a liar. I don't want you to get off at Antioch. We got a water ditch to build."

"I'm beginning to wonder about that," said Gale. "I just met a friend of yours. A red-headed woman."

Caution came into Morehouse's black eyes. "A red-headed woman? Prudence Kellogg? How the devil did you meet her?"

"She was putting her father to bed."

"Oh," said Morehouse. "And she told you I got him drunk?"

Gale was evasive. "She said several things."

For the first time, since they had come together, Morehouse lost his glibness and seemed uncomfortable. "Don't believe anything she tells you. She's no friend of mine. But she is a friend of Matt Roberts." Worry came into his eyes. "You didn't mention the water ditch, did you?"

"What if I did?"

Morehouse grew more agitated. "Well, did you?"

"Yes."

"You fool! You fool! You fool!" Morehouse flung back the covers and jumped out of the bunk to pace back and forth, his thin legs showing white and spindly beneath the flapping tails of his shirt. He came to a stop in front of Gale, staring up at him.

"What are you trying to do? Warn Matt Roberts of our plans so he can have every bruiser in California waiting for us?"

"I didn't tell Matt Roberts anything," said Gale. "I haven't even seen him. What's the girl got to do with him?"

"Nothing," said Morehouse. "Nothing. She's only going to marry Roberts. Fools and idiots. I'm always blessed with fools and idiots and drunkards. I get the surest deal in the world. It's a natural. It can't fail. And what do I get for help? Fools and idiots and drunkards."

Gale gave a half step back. "What in blazes is this all about?"

"Look," said Morehouse, drawing a deep, hard breath. "Just tell me exactly what happened."

Gale did. "And when I mentioned your name, she heaved a water pitcher right at my head. She nearly brained me."

MOREHOUSE sat back down on the bunk and pulled the blankets around him. "Well, what are we getting excited about? Women always cause trouble. Prudence Kellogg has caused me plenty. Her father's a lawyer and an old fool. He likes to make speeches and the miners like to listen to him. He's probably the best loved citizen in Carolina town. But he can't let a bottle alone, once he gets started."

"So you helped get him started, tonight."

Morehouse chuckled. "It wasn't tonight. It was yesterday I started him. Once you get him going, he can't stop. I couldn't have him making a deal with those bankers."

"What bankers?"

Morehouse hitched himself into a more comfortable position. "Well, when I got the idea for a second water company, Kellogg was the logical man to put at its head. I talked to him and he agreed. But his daughter doesn't like me."

"Why not?"

Morehouse went right on. "So Kellogg broke with me and decided to promote a company himself. My idea had been to sell stock to the miners. But he came to San Francisco to raise money from the banks. I couldn't have that. If outside bankers came into Carolina, the miners would never invest in my company. I had to stop Kellogg. The easiest way was to start him drinking. No banker is going to loan money to a drunken man." He grinned at his own memory. "Now you see why the girl doesn't like me?"

"There are several things I don't see," said Gale. "First, why was the girl willing to have her father go ahead with a water company scheme, but un-

willing to have him associated with you?"

"I said she didn't like me."

"Also," said Gale, "she called you a swindler. You admitted, a moment ago, that you are a liar. Are you a swindler, too?"

"How do you mean?" said Morehouse, his eyes going a little blank.

"It's possible," said Gale, "to sell stock in a proposition without ever intending to go further. Was that your idea with the water company, Spence? Was that the reason she called you a swindler; the reason she refused to let her father tie up with you?"

Morehouse ran his right hand casually under the pillow and left it there. "A while ago, I asked you if you thought you were hard enough to put aside your ethics and hit Roberts with every possible method. You said you were. Have you changed your mind?"

"What's that got to do with this?" asked Gale.

"Everything," said Morehouse. "If you're hard enough, together, nothing can stop us."

"I'm hard enough."

The small man relaxed. "All right. I am a swindler. I never intended to build that water ditch. But I intended to sell a half million dollars' worth of stock. It can't fail. Every miner in the country hates Roberts. They'll welcome a chance to strike at him. And, also, lower their water rates. Are you with me?"

"That's no deal," said Gale. "Where does it hurt Roberts? All you have is a cheap, crooked scheme to hurt forty thousand miners."

"Now wait a minute," said Morehouse. "If you're going to break Roberts, you're going to have to look a long way ahead. A while ago you said it would take money to break him. I'm offering you a chance to make that money. What do you care where it comes from?"

Gale moved away and sat down on the bench. He was certain now that Morehouse was not the least bit concerned about any revenge on Matt Roberts. The little man was only interested in easily made money and he would use anyone he could to further his own ambitions. At the moment, Gale's hatred of Roberts was made to order for his scheme.

Debating, Gale wondered if, by some chance, he could use the little man's conniving to break Roberts. Up until now he had been driven by an obsession to kill and get it over with. But if he were going to take this other way, he would be a fool not to use the weapons at hand. Yet he could not decide. He had not made up his mind quickly in the first place and this new decision could wait until he knew more about Morehouse and his methods.

He looked at Morehouse and said, "Maybe I don't care. We'll talk about it in the morning." He got up and crossed the cabin and turned out the lamp.

While he undressed in the dark he heard Morehouse twisting and turning and knew the little man had been made nervous by his apparent lack of decision. Gale made a note of that and smiled a little to himself.

DAYLIGHT, chill and dull and gray filtered through the cabin windows

[*Turn page*]

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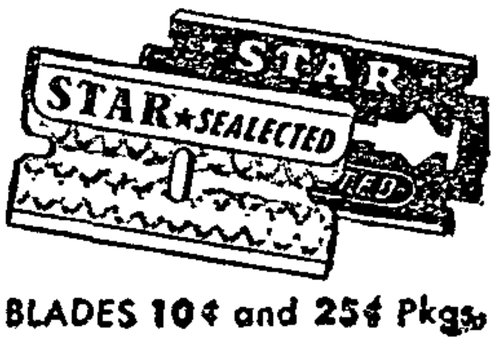

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when Gale came awake. Wild gusts rattled the door and occasional squalls of rain beat in against the sash.

Gale stretched and rose. His clothes were dry, but stiff and wrinkled. He moved to the stand and washed with a morning vigor Morehouse found distasteful. Spencer lay there, wide awake and alert, the blankets pulled up under his chin, watching.

"You're a healthy animal," he grumbled. "Come on back to bed and keep warm. We won't be in Stockton for three hours."

"That's too long to wait for breakfast," said Gale, ruffling his red hair, before the mirror. "Get up. I'm hungry."

"Breakfast!" Morehouse sat up. "Are you crazy? You're supposed to have dropped over the rail at Antioch. You better pray that no one finds out you're still aboard."

Gale turned and looked at him. "You don't think I'm going to hide here, do you?"

"You will unless you're altogether a fool. Not only Hames would like to lay hands on you, how about Roberts? You came out here to kill him. He's already killed your brother. Do you think he'll just stand there with his hands in his pockets when he sees you? You haven't even got a gun."

"You have, Spencer. What would happen to your water ditch if Roberts killed me?"

Morehouse jumped out of the bunk. "You mean you're going into it?"

"I'm still thinking about it," said Gale. "But you better not take any chances. Come to breakfast with me. If Roberts sees me, and pulls a gun, shoot him. That will be all right with me."

Quick anger darkened Spencer's black eyes. He was being used and he knew it and he did not like the idea. "Maybe I ought to let Roberts kill you," he said. "Maybe I ought to kill you myself. That would make Roberts a friend of mine."

"You won't," said Gale.

Muttering to himself Morehouse took his time to dress, straightening his coat with meticulous care. When he retrieved his small gun from beneath the pillow, he examined it carefully before dropping it into his coat pocket. Then, with an air of resignation, he followed Gale onto the walkway.

The boat ran now on the crest of a yellow flood that curved and twisted through a soaked land. There were no true river banks. Water spread out across the willow-lined shore, making small, muddy islands, mere humps rising out of the eddying currents and shallow swamps.

At the moment the rain had let up, but the sky remained a leaden arch, solid and threatening, turning everything below it drab and glossless and uninteresting. Sleepers still huddled on the wet boards of the deck, moaning profane protests at the rawness of the day.

Gale felt sorry for them, but Morehouse paid no attention. Stepping almost daintily around the mounds of baggage, he picked a path to the dining saloon.

The big room was furnished in the latest fashion, the windows curtained richly with red plush caught stiffly back with gold rope ties ,tasseled and ornate. The settees along the wall, in matching plush, were bolted in position, as were the white covered tables.

All this made no impression on Gale. He saw Roberts, instantly, and went cold, wrestling with the urges that had built up in him all these long months. Big and bulky and handsome, the man sat at the head of the captain's table. Gale knew a momentary satisfaction that the captain was not there, then all of his bitter interest came back to Roberts.

Here was a man who had been his friend, a man his judgement had forced upon his brother. Gale looked for some change in the full, florid face. Surely a man who had turned his back this far on what he had once been, would have changed. But there was no outward sign of it.

ROBERTS was smiling, animated. Prudence Kellogg sat at his right and Gale had the impression that her face, in repose, was even more beautiful than he had imagined. Across from her, her father sat silent and listless, a little sunken. His hands shook as he raised his coffee cup.

Gale brushed down Morehouse's restraining arm and walked directly over to pause behind the vacant chair at the girl's side. "Good morning," he said.

Prudence Kellogg looked around,

startled. Seeing him, color came rushing up into her cheeks. Roberts looked up, his full lips still formed in their smile, but the humor shocked out of him. His face grew stiff and ugly, and white lines ran down from the corners of his nostrils. Then, with a studied casualness that must have cost him heavily, he looked back at the girl.

"You were saying, Prudence . . . ?"

Morehouse, alert, had taken his position at the lower end of the table, facing Roberts. He stood motionless, waiting for the play.

Gale said, "Good morning, Miss Kellogg," and sat down.

Across the table, Wilson Kellogg, puzzled, put down his coffee cup. The girl's color heightened. Seeing this, Roberts showed his first trace of real annoyance and this pulled his attention back to Gale.

Gale's smile was meaningless. "How are you, Matt?"

"I'm sorry," said Roberts, measuring him. "I don't believe I know you." He looked back at the girl, as if he groped for his position. "Do you know him, Prudence?"

"We're old friends," said Gale.

Prudence stiffened and turned to Roberts. "I know nothing about him except that he is on his way to Carolina to build a water ditch. He said he was a friend of yours."

"He lies," said Roberts, flatly. With that he raised his bold gray eyes, putting the next move up to Gale.

"All right," said Gale. "Let it go."

Spencer Morehouse moved down the other side of the table to pause beside Kellogg. "Good morning, Wilson. I don't think you've met Ward Gale. He's my engineer. He's well acquainted with conditions in Carolina and has agreed to do something about them."

Interest flickered up in Kellogg's tired eyes. Sober, his legal mind was one of the shrewdest in the state and he had not missed the byplay between Roberts and this stranger. There were things beneath the surface here that had not yet come up.

Essentially an honest man, Kellogg disliked Roberts and his ruthless methods. As a father he feared this same ruthlessness in relation to his daughter and it tormented him to know that all he had to do to make things easy for himself was to compromise his principles. He dreamed constantly of a career in politics. With Roberts' backing, this could be easily accomplished. It was to Kellogg's credit that he would grasp at straws rather than take this smoother, surer way. Gale liked him, instantly.

Kellogg rose and reached his hand across the table. "This, sir," he said, "is indeed a pleasure." He was incapable of speaking without an orator's pompousness. "Indeed a pleasure, sir. If you are aware of the situation in Carolina, you are aware of one of the greatest injustices of . . ."

"Father!"

Kellogg let his words trail off, completely dominated by his daughter. He lapsed into embarrassed silence and sat down. Morehouse took the chair beside him. For Roberts' sake, Gale enjoyed the consternation his presence caused. Roberts having put the next move up to him, it pleased him not to make it. This way was better. He wondered what Roberts would have done had not the girl been there. Roberts had held his control well enough, but he was obviously disturbed and uncertain in the face of Gale's apparent acquaintanceship with the girl. That was something to remember.

Morehouse said, "Now that you have failed to interest the bankers, Wilson, wouldn't it be wise if you joined forces with Mr. Gale and myself?"

Prudence Kellogg pushed back her chair, rising, her voice icy. "I've told you before, Mr. Morehouse, that my family wants nothing to do with you. Come, father."

Wilson Kellogg mumbled something into his napkin and rose. Roberts followed him and put a possessive hand on the girl's arm. But before he moved away, he said across his shoulder, "You may find it hard to get to Carolina, gentlemen. Stockton's full of miners waiting for the road to dry. I don't believe you'll find seats on any stage."

RETURNED to the cabin, Morehouse dropped onto the berth and nursed his displeasure. "You and your appetite. You couldn't wait until Stockton. Oh, no. You had to go down there and make a fool of yourself. What did you accomplish?"

"Enough," said Gale. "Roberts is worried. Worry doesn't do a man any good."

"Matt, worried?" said Morehouse, scoffing. "He even denied knowing you and he almost convinced me. Do you think other people will believe your story?"

"I don't care what other people believe. Matt's a good actor. But underneath, he's worried. He doesn't know how much I've told the girl. That will worry him. I didn't mention my brother, *The Witch* or anything. He isn't even certain how much I know. That will worry him. You were right, Spence. This is better than killing him."

"Sure," said Morehouse. "All you have to worry about is him killing you, now. He's warned. The girl brought up the water ditch. I had to talk about it, then. It's better to talk about something than to try and hide it, once it's out in the open. You better decide to go ahead with me, Ward. In this country, a man is on one side of the fence or the other. You're going to need all the help you can get."

"We'll see," said Gale. "I haven't made up my mind, yet."

"Then I'm done with you," said Morehouse, rising. "I'm not going to hurt my chances by getting involved in your fight with Roberts."

He reached for the door and it opened in his face. The mate stepped in, backed by two deckhands armed with rifles.

"Well, mister," the mate said, looking at Gale, "you can't take advice very well, can you?"

Gale said nothing. Morehouse was poised, rigid, waiting his chance. It never came. The rifles were unwavering, deadly. The mate said, "My orders are to search you both."

He moved behind Gale and ran his hands over him. "All right," he said and moved on to Morehouse, making his search as thorough. But he failed to find the pepperbox and Gale was surprised.

"All right," the mate said, again.

Morehouse's eyes were muddy and unreadable. "What happens now?"

"I don't know," the mate said. "My orders are to lock you in this cabin. Don't try anything. These men will be outside."

He left. The key clicked definitely in the lock and Gale waited for the little man's outburst.

Morehouse sat down. "It looks like," he said, thoughtfully, "both of us have been arguing needlessly. We'll never get to Carolina, now. You and your appetite. Fools, idiots and drunkards weren't enough. Now I can add pigs."

"You can add that big mouth of yours," said Gale. "If I hadn't listened to you, last night, I'd have killed Roberts."

Morehouse reached down inside his belt. He found a string and, pulling on it, lifted the pepperbox out of his pants leg.

"I," he said, flatly, "may have to kill somebody, myself, to get out of this jam. And I'm not going to be particular about who it is."

III

THE port of Stockton was built on a swamp, its embarcadero reclaimed from green tule bogs. Every sort of stuff had been used for fill—drift logs, abandoned freight, all the debris of the wild migration. It sprawled, rank and foul, a muddy monument to man's everlasting stubbornness.

Not even Captain Weber had anticipated the mushroom growth of his town. But it was in a natural geographical position on the low river bank where the through travel route left the stream and cut southward toward the southern mines and the settlements beyond.

Unlovely in the best of times, it was a madhouse now, filled to the bursting point with impatient men. Its shed-like warehouses were crammed, its docks were loaded and piles of uncovered goods sank rotting in the wet.

The upper town was in no better shape. The raw plank and canvas buildings along the rutted mire of Center Street were not sufficient to house the stranded travelers held in this chilly hole by the unprecedented rains and the bottomless mud of the curving road to the south.

Men slept on floors, on cots and in the filth of alley mouths. By day they surged restlessly from one dive to another, from one plank bar to the next. Food was short, but the supply of whiskey was inexhaustible. Men brawled and drank and fought and stared in sullen boredom at the leaden sky, waiting for the sun.

The arrival of each fresh steamer

made the only break in their monotony and the *Cornucopia's* plume of smoke, rising over the swamps, emptied the bars, silenced the tinny pianos and stilled the shrill cries of the girls.

Like rats coaxed from their holes, the population poured into the street. Men slouched toward the water front in a phalanx which jammed the thoroughfare from building line to building line, until the embarcadero was filled with a solid crowd turning their bearded faces upward toward the steamer's decks, their hoarse voices shouting greetings and obscene advice.

From inside their cabin, Gale and Morehouse heard the swell of sound and moved to the windows to have their glimpse of the sorry town and the crowd below. Gale noted everything, seeing all this for the first time, but it was old to Morehouse and he was only interested in a few details.

"There's Ben Derksen," he said. "The fat fellow standing by himself. Over there against the mud wall."

"Who's he?" said Gale, with little interest.

"My driver," said Morehouse. "I left him with the wagon and team. You've got to guard horses in Stockton. They'll steal them right out from under you. If we could attract Ben's attention . . ."

Gale saw a huge, round man planted against a crumbling, mud wall, a human barrel of a man who seemed to put a strain on anything he leaned against.

"What would move him?" said Gale.

"Don't let him fool you," Morehouse said. "When he wants to, Ben can move. He was with Taylor in Mexico. I've seen him lift a barrel of beer over his head and toss it thirty feet."

But Derksen was too far away and Gale's interest shifted from him. Outside, the two guards were jostled as men streamed past, eager to get ashore. They flowed down the gangplank in a surging, bundle-laden stream. Gale had an impulse to smash the glass and call out to them, but remembering the men he had left behind him, in San Francisco Bay, he knew these gold seekers were too intent on landing to pay any attention to another man's troubles. He turned, finally, and sat down on the bench, not one to waste his energies on futilities.

It was almost an hour before a key rattled in the lock and the door opened. The mate said, "All right. You can go ashore now."

"Just like that?" said Gale.

"Just like that," the mate said.

MOREHOUSE stepped ahead of Gale and moved onto the deck, reaching the rail and looking down. "Oh," he said. "So that's it."

Gale moved to his side. A huge man stood at the foot of the gangplank, blocking it, staring up at them, his broken teeth showing as he smiled through a stubble of black beard.

In spite of the cold drizzle, his shirt was open almost to his belt, showing the thick mat of his chest hair. His left ear was puffed and wrinkled, standing out thickly through his unkempt hair. Behind him, a half-dozen men made a semicircle, obviously for his support. The dregs of the crowd idled beyond, watching, waiting hopefully, as if guessing what would happen.

"Who's the ox?" asked Gale.

"It's Peter Chauncey Burns," said Morehouse. "A professional bruiser. He works for Roberts."

"Good?" asked Gale.

"He's licked Yankee Sullivan, twice. Once in the ring and once out of it."

Behind them the mate said, "Still going ashore, Mr. Gale?"

Gale turned to grin. From the corner of his eye he saw Spencer's small hand move out of sight into his coat pocket.

"Not that," said Gale, quickly. "Come on."

Lightly, he dropped down the ladder to the engine deck and moved along it to the sloping, cleated plank. Morehouse muttered at his shoulder.

"I can hit his belt buckle or his left eye from here. Once we make it to my team, they'll never catch us."

"No," said Gale. "Save that gun for Roberts."

Gale paused then, looking behind him and upward. Two coated figures stood at the edge of the texas. One of them was Roberts, the other Captain Hames, his bare head showing a circle of white bandage. Though Gale looked at them, both men pretended not to notice him. He knew, then, this was no accident, and started down the plank.

"All right, Burns," he said. "All right."

Gale had not led a sheltered life and he recognized the signs when Burns

spat and grinned and settled himself. He had no real fear of the man alone. His early years at sea had conditioned him and brought him into close bodily contact with other men like Burns. What he did fear were Burns' confederates against his back; there were too many of them for Morehouse, even with his gun.

But he knew how these things went. If he could catch the interest of the lingering crowd, if he could turn the fight into a sporting event, then the spectators would assure him fair play.

"You think you can keep me from landing, eh Burns?"

"I'll run you back on board with your tail between your legs."

"A hundred says you can't."

Greed lighted Burns' eyes, and cruel eagerness. "Let's see your money, sport."

"Morehouse has mine. Give him yours to hold."

Burns hesitated and Gale mocked him. "What's the matter? A hundred too much for you to lose?"

The big man licked his coarse lips, pulled a small pouch from his pocket and tossed it to Morehouse. "Watch the little feller, boys. I'll collect from him when I kill this redhead."

The crowd closed in now and Gale did not wait. He took the last two steps on the run and whipped his left fist into Burns' face. The big man sat down in the mud.

His friends tried to rush in, but they were caught by neutral spectators and hauled back. Men quickly formed a rough ring, shouting, "Fair fight! Fair fight!"

Burns struggled to his feet, shaking his head, and fell into a prize ring stance, his left arm extended, right arm bent up at the elbow, his chin held back.

Gale had no intention of fighting Burns' own way. He danced in, his fists held close, his shoulders hunched to protect his chin. He flicked a sharp, jolting punch into Burns' mouth, moving sideways and away as the blow landed on its target.

Burns missed a savage swing and pivoted heavily to meet this strange attack. Angered like a tormented bull, he roared and lashed out again. His knuckles ripped harshly across Gale's shoulder flesh.

GALE'S return smashed wickedly on that bent ear, jarring the heavy skull. It stopped Burns, but pain laced up Gale's arm as his knuckles split, turning his stomach sick and his knees weak. He was saved, for the moment, only by the fact that Burns was staggered. Then Burns came in again, his long arms sweeping like scythes. He landed twice before Gale could tie him up, the rocklike fists jolting with cutting force.

Using his crippled left arm as a hook, Gale partly smothered the next attack. The shouts of the crowd made a dull roar. Heavy whiskers scratched his face. Burns' breath was rank with whiskey and tobacco. It belched out each time Gale's left fist hammered into the man's short ribs.

Burns wrenched to free himself and failed. Lowering his head, suddenly, he used it as a ram to butt Gale in the mouth.

Gale exploded. The pain of his smashed lips drove out reason and restraint. He beat and pounded Chauncey Burns and never knew the return punishment he took nor felt the pain of his ruined hand. His shirt was torn away, his body lacerated.

In the end it was condition that won. Gale was younger. Burns went to his knees from exhaustion, burying his face between Gale's legs. Even in this position, Burns tried to upset his redheaded tormenter. Gale stepped back and brought up a knee and Burns slid forward into the mud.

For a moment Gale stood over him. Then, turning, he glanced up to where Roberts stood. That done, not caring, he walked numbly through the parted crowd and reached the foot of Center Street.

Here Ben Derksen moved away from the wall of Pont's Saloon and took his arm as Morehouse came up.

"Why that was a fight," the fat man said, and smacked his spongy lips. "I guess I never saw a fight like that before. Who is he, Spence?"

Morehouse was shaken. Looking at Gale's battered face, he said, "What was the idea, Ward, of making me hold the bet? How did you know I could pay if you lost?"

"If I had lost," said Gale, "that wouldn't have made any difference. We'd have both been back on that boat

and lucky if we ever saw San Francisco. Which reminds me. Where's that hundred I won?"

Morehouse held back. "We're partners, aren't we?"

"Not yet," said Gale.

"All right," said Morehouse. "How you going to get to Carolina? You think Roberts will let you ride one of his stages? No. And you can't ride to Carolina in my wagon unless we're partners."

Gale managed a grin. "I tell you what." His voice was stronger now, his breathing less labored. "You keep the money and give me a ride to Carolina."

Morehouse nodded quickly. "That's a deal. And we'll start right now before Roberts thinks up something else to do. Get the team, Ben."

"Well, I'll tell you," said Ben Derksen, shifting his big weight from one foot to the other. He removed his broken hat and pointed to a huge knot on the side of his round head. "See that? I went to sleep in the wagon, the other night. When I waked up, the wagon was gone." He hitched his gun belt with a certain dignity and sent tobacco juice out in a brown jet to splash against the mud.

Morehouse looked so dumbfounded, Gale burst out laughing. He said, "I can't ride in your wagon if you haven't one, Spence. Give me my money. At least I can get some clothes."

Morehouse, paying no attention, danced in front of Derksen. "You dumb ox! What's the matter with you, anyway? Now we're stuck. We'll never get out of Stockton and it's all your fault."

Derksen gave his belt another hitch. "Why, if you don't like it, Mr. Morehouse," he said, "the next time you go to San Francisco, you can stay in Stockton and watch your own team."

"No use getting sore," said Gale. "Give me that money."

Reluctantly, the small man slid the gold into Gale's hand. "What about our water deal?"

"I haven't made up my mind, yet," said Gale. "Find me a way to get to Carolina and I'll talk to you." He turned without another word, and plodded up the center of the muddy street.

GALE came out of Leobetter's store, carrying a bulky package, and angled across toward Henn's Shaving Parlor. Men had already drifted back from the landing, filling the board walks in little groups or wading aimlessly through the muck. They paused as he passed, watching him with silent awe.

Behind the barbershop was a homemade shower, a bucket hung between two uprights, from a cross bar. Below it was a grating made from slippery slats, covering a tub of water.

The water was not entirely clean. You filled the bucket from the tub. You stood on the slats, shivering and naked and let the water, running out of the perforated bucket, course down your back. A piece of tattered canvas offered a certain privacy, but it was too badly torn to make much protection.

Gale paid his dollar and received a chunk of yellow soap. He stepped into the yard and stripped. Then, filling the bucket, he stood under the trickling stream and soaped himself, thoroughly.

His hand was puffed and throbbing and the lye soap ate at his cuts and bruises, making them sting. But the cold water brought life to his aching legs. It took three full buckets to rinse his body, then he dressed.

The town had offered little in the way of finery. A miner's red shirt was the best he found and a pair of butternut pants, at least clean. His boots he kept, but he added a belt and a single pistol to his outfit.

Thus dressed, he stepped back into the shop and let the barber's scissors shorten his hair and the razor scrape his battered chin.

Returning to the street, he sought the nearest bar. The whiskey found the cuts inside his mouth, searing them with its sharp, antiseptic touch. Several of the drinkers spoke to him. He nodded, vaguely, wondering how they knew his name and not much caring. He was hungry as it neared noon and he found a place to eat, dining on venison, flat, soggy biscuits and a helping of beans.

With a cigar between his teeth he left the restaurant and leaned against the plank wall outside, considering and trying to reach a decision. He felt pulled this way and that. Ever since the *Cornucopia* had struck the skiff in San Francisco Bay, he had gone off on tangents rather than press closer to the hub of his first plan. Now, viewing the

crowded street, the men hurrying nowhere and the endless mud, he felt helpless. He wondered where Roberts might stay in a place like this. He wondered what had become of the girl. Morehouse might know. It irked Gale to feel so dependent, but he pushed this down, starting along the street.

As he did so, four men fell in behind him, making no pretense to hide the fact. Across the street, a half dozen more kept steady pace, looking over at him. Gale stopped and turned quickly and walked back against the four on his side. He said, "Hello, boys."

They grinned and one said, "Howdy, Red. That sure was a trimming you gave Burns. The boys at Moke Hill or Hangtown would have paid good to see that one."

"An idea," said Gale. "But I thought that because I'd licked Burns, somebody might be following me to get even."

"Don't worry about that, Red. That's what we're here for."

Startled, Gale looked at each one. Then he smiled, not quite understanding. "All right," he said, and went on, the four keeping step behind him.

Moving this way up the street, his following increased until he reached the hotel. He paused again, looking inside.

HERE were none of the comforts of the river steamer. The place was sparsely furnished with makeshift things, temporary and Spartan in their plainness. A high desk backed up against the stairs. Behind it, a square keyboard held twenty hooks. Beyond that, through an arch, he had a glimpse of the dining room, long and narrow, almost filled with a center table, this table bare except for a double row of tin plates faced down to keep off the flies.

Gale had a momentary view the full length of the two rooms. At the far end of the dining table, Spencer Morehouse sat with a book spread open before him and there were piles of gold at his right elbow. Wondering what game the little swindler was playing. Gale moved in through the crowd.

Morehouse was saying, "Any more? This chance won't come again. Stock is half value, now. Once we reach Carolina, the shares will be a hundred dollars each."

Apparently the crowd was already milked. No one else approached the table. Instead, the men in the room turned their elation on Gale. Several of them pressed forward to slap his shoulder. One, made lean looking by an enormous beard, said, "Our money's on you, Red. You'll lick Roberts the same way you took Burns."

"What's this all about?" asked Gale.

Morehouse spoke sharply. "That's all, boys. Ben, clear the room. We'll have a business conference."

Gale had not seen Derksen standing to the right of the entrance. The fat man moved out now and breasted the crowd, expertly forcing them toward the lobby. When the last man was gone, he closed the doors and put his back against them.

"All right, Ward," said Morehouse, then. "Come on and pitch in." He waved a hand almost disdainfully at the gold. "It's half yours."

Gale walked over and stared down at the small fortune. "How did we get it?"

"We got it by selling stock in our water company. The Miner's Mutual Water Company of Carolina."

"Not we," said Gale. "I haven't made up my mind."

"I couldn't wait for you to make up your mind," said Morehouse, smiling. "I made it up for you. You might as well take your cut. You're running half the risks."

"No," said Gale, roughly. "I make up my own mind. When I do I'll let you know."

"You're my engineer, Red, whether you make up your mind or not. Ben's been spreading the word all over town. The boys are snapping at the bait. They like the way you handled Burns."

"Spence," said Gale, "you're not even smart. What makes you think I'll stand for a deal like this? I'm going out on the street, right now, and tell everybody the truth. And don't have Ben try to stop me. I kind of like him."

"He won't stop you," said Morehouse. "Go on out and yell your head off. They've all been told you'll deny being tied up with me. We've whispered that you're being kept under cover until we're ready to spring you on Roberts. When a man invests his hard earned money, he likes to be in on little secrets like that. It makes everything seem

more honest and aboveboard when you trust the stockholders. Why they've even formed committees to follow you around so Roberts' toughs can't do us any harm. You say I'm not smart, huh?"

GALE smothered his anger. "All right, Spence," he said. "We part company here and now. Maybe you can think up something to tell your investors when your engineer turns up missing."

"I've already thought of it," said Morehouse, lazing back in his chair. "I'll tell them I was fooled, the same as they were. I'll tell them my engineer ran off with all the money."

Gale smashed his fist down on the table top. "Then I'll find the men who have paid in and give them their money back."

"No you won't," said Morehouse. "You don't know who they are and I won't tell you. And, if you're dumb enough to make a public announcement, this is what will happen. Half the town will show up, claiming they bought stock. You couldn't find enough gold in Stockton to pay them off, Ward. I know these boys."

Gale stood motionless and silent so long, Morehouse burst out laughing. "This time you're holding the bet while I have the fun. I've got it all thought out and there's nothing you can do about it."

Gale crowded against the table. Morehouse jumped up, backing away.

"Watch him, Ben."

The fat man shifted to free his guns, stopping as Gale laughed. "What's the matter, Spence?" said Gale. "You've got me. I'm in a box. I'll help you sell your stock."

He watched Morehouse relax, taking his time. "But you're planning to run out as soon as you have the money in your hand. You're not going to run, Spence. I'm going to make you build that water ditch. We'll give the miners such cheap water Roberts won't be able to sell a drop. I'm going to use you, Morehouse, the way you tried to use me. I'll use you and your ditch to break Matt Roberts. Now, damn you and your smart tricks, how do you like that?"

He saw real concern leap into Spencer's eyes and behind him, Gale heard Derksen's sudden chuckle, as the fat man said, "Why I guess he's got you, Spence. I guess maybe he's smarter than you are." And by the tone of the man's voice, Gale knew Derksen had changed sides. From now on the fat man belonged to him.

Gale watched Morehouse think about it. The small man said finally, "We'll see, Ward. We'll see. We're stuck in Stockton. How do you expect to get to Carolina? Walk?" He grinned and his good humor returned.

"We'll ride the stage," said Gale.

"Sure," said Morehouse. "I can just see Matt Roberts. He won't even charge us. He'd love to have us ride his stage."

Ben Derksen started to laugh. "Sure. I'll bet."

Gale turned to look at the fat man. "You afraid of Roberts, Ben?"

"I'm not afraid of anyone." Derksen was not bragging, but he had a certain pride. "But how are you going to get on the stage?"

"We'll steal a ride," said Gale.

"That's impossible," said Morehouse.

Derksen's small round eyes were thoughtful. "He licked Burns, Spence. Remember that. A man who can lick Burns can do almost anything if he wants to bad enough."

"I want to bad enough," said Gale. "I didn't travel six thousand miles to rot here in this Stockton mud."

IN THE morning, Ward Gale came out of the Stockton House and stepped onto the muddy sidewalk. He spread his feet apart and let the mire grip him. His big body broke the milling crowd and made a little eddy into which Spencer Morehouse moved his slighter build.

Morehouse was still bitter and protesting. Gale, not trusting him, carried the gold which the smaller man had collected.

Across the street, before the stage office, the high wheeled mud wagon stood motionless. Glittering with red paint, its sides were decorated with gold lettering: ROBERTS EXPRESS.

Against the drab mud and canvas and plank buildings the outfit looked fancy. Roberts new character showed in everything he owned. His boats were the newest and the best, his horses well cared for and spirited. His equipment always looked new and fresh painted to attract other men. How he used it was

something else. Even the woman he had chosen, Gale thought, had been picked for her attractiveness.

The driver, chunky and motionless as he held the restless team in hand, was also spruce, for Roberts insisted that all his employees be well dressed and clean shaven. Gale watched the man.

"Who's driving?"

"Bill Conroy." Morehouse's tone was short. "This is a silly business. You'll get us all killed. Conroy's dangerous."

"I don't think so," said Gale, and shifted his attention to the crowd, knowing there must be several of Roberts' bruisers present. "If we have trouble, everyone who's invested in your water company will help us fight. They better."

Morehouse mumbled an answer which Gale failed to catch. Prudence Kellogg and her father had moved from the express office with Roberts behind them, trailed by the agent who carried the baggage and the mail.

Gale centered the full edge of his attention on Roberts, weighing his former friend, noting the man's proprietary interest in the girl, the way Roberts helped her into the rear seat and then stepped back while Kellogg hoisted his frail body to a place beside her. Then Roberts stepped into the center seat as other passengers appeared in the office doorway.

Ben Derksen moved instantly from his position against the building front and cut these passengers off. Gale threw himself forward into the crowd, opening a path through the jammed street and came against his side of the mud wagon as Derksen's fat body moved against the other.

Seeing Derksen and guessing his intent, Bill Conroy raised his whip, his voice a little shrill with concern. "Keep off, Ben. Keep off."

Roberts turned quickly to watch Derksen, and Gale swung into the wagon, followed by Morehouse. Gale reached and caught the tip of Conroy's back help whip. As Conroy turned, Derksen swung up, his weight making the braces creak.

Morehouse had his pepperbox in his small hand, covering Roberts. Now that the action had started, his black eyes glittered with excitement. Gale's gun was still in his belt. He left Roberts for Morehouse and Derksen. Sliding an arm around Conroy's neck, he shoved a fist into the man's throat, pulling his head back and half choking him.

With his other hand he seized the reins, shaking them loose. The team reared and the startled hostlers jumped for safety. Only now did the crowd realize what was happening as the horses lunged into their collars and bolted.

Men scurried out of their way, yelling. The red wheels spun, throwing off great clods of mud as they charged up Center Street, Gale fighting the team with one hand and trying to hold Conroy with the other. Not until they were clear of Stockton, did he release his grip on Conroy, shoving the lines back into the angry man's hands. Then he turned and smiled at Roberts.

"Sorry, Matt. We couldn't figure any other way to get to Carolina."

PRUDENCE KELLOGG had watched in amazement. Everything had happened so rapidly she had hardly had time to gasp. But her father did not bother to conceal his amusement. He hated Matt Roberts so thoroughly that it made him an automatic partisan of anyone who attacked the stage owner.

Roberts had not spoken. He sat white-faced, careful under the threat of Morehouse's gun pressed against his ear. On his other side, Derksen's huge bulk overflowed, crowding him against Morehouse.

Gale ran his hands over Conroy and pulled a gun from the man's belt, sending it spinning into the mud. Using this as a signal, Morehouse did the same with Matt Roberts. Then his pepperbox disappeared into his pocket and he stretched, well satisfied with himself.

"That, Ward Gale," he said, "was a neat trick. I've heard of a stage being held up, but I never saw one stolen before."

Roberts ignored him. It was to Derksen that he spoke. "You're in bad company, Ben. I'll not forget this, or your part in it."

"Why," said Derksen, lazily, "I guess I'd feel real bad if you did forget it. I guess I don't like you much." He gave Roberts a childlike smile, then twisted, shoving an elbow into the man's side as he said to the girl, "How are you, Miss Prudence? You comfortable back there? We left in such a hurry. But you see we

got a water company to build."

"Ben," said Prudence, and showed by her tone she had some liking for the fat man, "Mr. Roberts is right. You're in bady company. Both these men are swindlers. They have no intention, whatever, of building anything. All they mean to do is to sell stock to the miners and then disappear with the money."

Derksen shook his head. He was an open person with no reticence. "You're wrong," he said. "That's what Spence planned to do. But Gale won't let him run away. Gale's going to make him build that water ditch."

Prudence Kellogg was startled. "Why?" she asked.

Derksen used a finger to scratch the edge of his ear. "Well, now, I don't rightly know. He's never said, except that he hates Matt Roberts. Why are you going to build that water ditch, Mr. Gale?"

Morehouse, frowning, had been trying to shut Ben Derksen up. But Gale, sitting at Conroy's elbow, turned, his face calm, almost bland, as if he were enjoying the fat man's talk.

"Let's leave it at that, Ben," he said. "I hate Roberts. I've got reasons to hate you, haven't I Matt? And another water company wouldn't do you any good."

Matt Roberts tried to keep his voice from being ragged. "I said on the boat that I don't know you. I still don't." He turned abruptly to face the girl and her father. "That's the trouble with this country. There's no law, no order, no authority, no protection for a man or his property. Every shirt tail miner in the place considers himself as good as anyone else."

"Those very things, sir," said Wilson Kellogg, "have made it easy for you."

Roberts flushed dully and was silent. Ben Derksen laughed.

"You know, Wilson, trouble with Matt is, he's getting important. I remember when he first come here. He'd sold his boat and cargo and he had some money. But he wasn't nothing but a sailor ashore. Now he kind of gives himself airs."

Roberts did not answer the fat man. He sat silent, staring straight ahead at the back of Gale's head and, watching him Prudence thought, "Why does he keep denying that they know each other? What's between them? Why is Matt afraid of this man?"

IV

THE team slowed finally, their energies sucked out by the gripping mud. But their progress still was faster than that of the ponderous freight wagons mired so deeply their axles dragged.

The road was fenced by discarded things, clothing and broken tools and wagon wheels, the flotsam of a hurried, uncaring migration that had streamed out wildly across this San Joaquin plain toward the illusive riches of the gold camps beyond.

The sun had come out and here and there patches of water glistened. Even the small hillocks were soaked. The whole country was little better than a morass and to Gale's brooding mind it was hard to conceive that any place in California men could actually need water enough to buy it.

Far to the east the green lift of the foothills broke the symmetry of the flat land. And beyond, rising from a purple haze, the higher peaks of the Sierra Nevadas with their everlasting snows, swam lace-like against the banked clouds.

In spite of the dull ache of his anger which had absorbed his full attention for months, Gale felt a stir of interest. This land was so vast, so unending.

Morehouse had talked long during the preceding night. This was the rainy season, unprecedented in its intensity. But once the rains had stopped, the foothills would soon turn dry and dusty and Carolina, sitting astraddle of its ancient river channel, would be a good five miles from water.

This, then, in other circumstances, could have offered a real opportunity. A chance for a man to build something permanent. Something for profit, yet also for service. But riding in the jolting wagon, Ward Gale measured the opportunity against one thing only, its effect on Matt Roberts. He was not deceived by Roberts' quietness, by the man's apparent acceptance of the situation. He knew Roberts was worried and the thought pleased him. But he also knew he must be constantly on his guard. Roberts, having come this far and done this much, could not stop

now. And only Ward Gale, out of all those in California, linked him with his past.

At six o'clock the tired horses dragged them into the rutted yard beside Simmons' Tent. Gale stepped down stiffly, staring at the huge canvas and board structure. This was something he had not counted on, stopping for the night. There were at least twenty men loafing about the entrance. He turned to Morehouse, and asked in an undertone, "Does this place belong t. Roberts?"

The small man shrugged. "It's a stage stop. He's got some hostlers here. The tent belongs to Simmons. It's the halfway point." He turned his cocky grin up at Gale. "Looks like I better sell some stock so we have some friends in this crowd."

"You better spend your time watching the stage," said Gale.

"Let Ben do that," said Morehouse.

Derksen, who had joined them, complained. "Look, Spence. Always I'm the man who has to sleep out in the cold while you can go inside where the whiskey is."

Morehouse said, angrily, "You didn't do such a good job in Stockton, Ben. We wouldn't be in this spot if you'd kept your eyes open there. No whiskey for you until we get to Carolina."

"One little drink?" Derksen appealed to Gale. "A man gets powerful dry riding through mud all day."

Gale said, "One drink, but I'll bring it to you. Get back on that stage and watch Conroy every minute."

WILSON KELLOGG helped his daughter from the stage. Morehouse, with ready courtesy, came forward and took the girl's bags and the three of them made a small group on their way toward the Tent.

The stage pulled on toward the corral, Conroy driving, Derksen's bulk on the seat at his side. And, for the first time in years, Gale found himself alone with Matt Roberts.

Roberts waited until the Kelloggs had disappeared inside before he spoke. Then he said, in a toneless voice, "You won't get away with this, Ward. Everything's stacked against you. I own this country."

"I owned a ship, once," said Gale.

"What ship?" said Roberts. "My papers were in order when I sailed *The Witch* into San Francisco. Who would believe you against me?"

"You killed Peter."

"Did I? That's a serious charge you're making, Ward. Could you prove it?"

"I'm not going to try," said Gale. "I came here to kill you, but now I've changed my mind. Instead of that I'm going to strip you of everything you own and everything you want, until you have nothing at all. Then, maybe, I'll kill you."

Roberts did not seem impressed. "You think so, Ward? Why you fool, I could stop you right here. But I'm going to let you come on to Carolina. When you get there, the Kelloggs won't be with you every night. Remember that." He turned away then and moved toward the Tent, careful where he stepped so that the mud would not soil his glistening boots.

Watching him go Gale realized Roberts had changed. This man was not the same as the one who had sailed out of Boston two years before. The arrogance of success, and confidence in the methods he had used to attain it, had armored Roberts against all uncertainty. A feeling of futility came to Gale and he wondered if he had not been a fool to listen to Morehouse. His own way would have been much simpler. He could do it now and not worry about traveling further. But he could not do it now.

He called after Roberts. "The Kelloggs won't be with you every night, either, Matt."

Supper finished, Gale loafed in the Tent and considered the long room, through the eddying smoke of his cigar. The building was divided into unequal parts by a canvas wall, the smaller portion reserved for women travelers. The larger section was one room, unfurnished save for a plank bar at one end with its whiskey keg.

Men were already rolled in their blankets, sleeping on the packed earth of the floor. Morehouse stood beside the bar talking eagerly to some prospective stock buyers.

Neither Roberts nor Kellogg was in sight.

Made restless by their absence and remembering Derksen's drink, Gale moved to the bar, filled one of the tin cups half up with the fiery liquor and stepped out into the night.

It was still clear. The dark arch of the sky was speckled to almost a milky whiteness by a myriad of stars. The night wind had lost its chill and came soft from the distant hills.

Gale stood a moment, letting his eye pupils contract after the glare of the sputtering lamps. Then, when he picked up his night sight, he moved toward the corral, alert to everything around him. To the right, beyond the corral fence, a fire flickered up into the darkness. Around this blaze huddled a dozen Californios, their voices rising softly, yet mournfully in a Spanish song.

He paused to listen, wondering how these men felt, their homeland invaded by a horde of foreigners. Then he moved on toward the corral.

Inside the pole structure the horses moved restlessly, chomping at the few spears of grass around the edges of the barrier. The stage made a high, dark outline and heading for this he heard the click of a cocking gun and stopped motionless. Ben Derksen's heavy voice reached him. "Speak out. Who are you?"

"Ah," said Gale. "So you're still awake?" and continued forward. "I brought your drink."

Ben seized the cup and drained it before he answered. "Why thanks," he said, then. "After what you said I guessed one drink would be all I'd get."

"Who gave you the other one?"

"Why Spence did," said Derksen, with great satisfaction. "He brought it when he brought my supper."

Gale relaxed. "Have you seen Roberts?"

Derksen said, shrewdly, "You thought maybe Roberts was feeding me liquor, huh? You know, Mr. Gale, you're worrying about Roberts. I guessed the idea was for you to worry him."

"That's the idea," said Gale.

"When a man gets spooky," said Ben, smacking his lips, "he's liable to miss what he aims at. A spooky man don't think clear."

"That's right, Ben."

"You bet. So you got to keep crowding Roberts. You worried him when you licked Burns. You worried him when you stole the stage. It worried him when I told him about the water ditch. But he ain't spooked yet. You'll have to keep pushing him all the time until he gets spooky. Then he'll make a mistake. How you going to push him tonight?"

"Here?" said Gale. "I don't know."

"You got to think up a way, Mr. Gale. You can't let him rest quiet for a minute. Not Matt, you can't."

Gale did not answer. He swung away from the stage and slowly circled the corral. He took no stock in Roberts' word that he would let them proceed to Carolina. Roberts' and Conroy's disappearance bothered him and each shadow held a danger now.

At the corner of the fence nearest the fire, he stopped, still in shadow and searched the group about the flame. Neither Roberts nor Conroy was there. There was no chance of error here. The dress of these men was foreign as the voices which still rose in song. Firelight warmed their silver ornaments and, back of them, the blaze flickered softly on the crucifix of a black robed priest.

THE melody of the song reached into Gale, loosening the tightness that had grown on him. He leaned back against the fence, letting the music flow through him. When he heard the step he whirled. Someone came toward him along the dark fence. He loosened his gun and said, "That's close enough."

The figure stopped. Then Wilson Kellogg spoke clearly, "It's me, sir. I've been looking for you."

"All right," said Gale and moved into the deeper shadows toward the man. "What do you want?"

"To talk to you," said Kellogg. "There are some things, sir, I want to understand."

"What?" said Gale.

"Your attitude toward Roberts."

"That," said Gale, "is my business."

"No," said Kellogg. "It may affect us all. Are you honestly intending to build this water ditch?"

"I'm going to build it," said Gale.

"Why, sir? Because you want the ditch, or because you hate Matt Roberts?"

"What differences does that make to you or anyone else?"

"It makes no difference to me," said Kellogg, slowly, "as long as you build the ditch. But it could make a big difference to you. There's something between you and Matt Roberts. I take no stock in his denial that he knows you. I, sir, hold myself a good judge of men."

"Then keep away from me."

"No," said Kellogg. "You're hard and bitter but it will take a hard man to complete that water ditch. You'll need help. I have come to offer you what help I can give."

Gale looked at him half curiously. "You hate Roberts, too," he said.

"That isn't important," said Kellogg. "I love Carolina. I have great dreams for the town. I am trying to have it made the state capital. That's why I'll help you with this second water ditch, if you will accept me, sir."

Gale stuck out his hand. Kellogg's grip was firm and warm. "Thank you, Mr. Gale," said Kellogg, and walked away....

PRUDENCE KELLOGG held herself stiffly, her fists clenched at her sides. She had come out of the darkness the moment her father had turned the corner of the corral.

"What did you talk to my father about?"

Gale folded his arms and smiled at her and took his time. "You were close enough to hear what was said."

The stray light from the distant fire showed him her sudden flush. "All right," she said. "I did hear."

"I know," Gale said. "Lucky there were no water pitchers out there in the grass. But I was ready to duck all the time."

She stamped her foot. "You're worse than Morehouse. My father is gullible. He's honest himself and it's hard for him to realize that the world is full of cheats and thieves."

"You're father's an honest man," said Gale, "and he's a good judge of men. You would be, too, if you'd let yourself. Why do you shut your eyes to Roberts' faults? How can you even consider marrying the man?"

"That's none of your business."

"That's none of my business," Gale said, "but your father is. Morehouse has a bad reputation. I'm unknown in Carolina. But your father is known and respected and liked. I need him. I need him as the front man for our water company."

Prudence said, "The front man for your swindle. You're only doing this because you hate Matt Roberts."

"You're mixed up," said Gale. "I hate Matt Roberts. Now which would hurt Matt more? Me swindling some miners, or building this water ditch?"

Prudence said, uncertainly, "But Morehouse . . . ?"

Gale said, "I know what you're thinking about. But right now Morehouse is of use to me. And I will use him or your father or anyone else who comes to hand to get at Roberts."

She moved her hands suddenly, and changed her tone. "What is it between you and Matt?"

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you the truth."

"Why don't you try?" The change in her was instantaneous. As fast as she had taken to anger in the river boat cabin, she grew soft and warm now, using a woman's way to find out what she wanted to know.

Gale shook his head. "Don't beg like that."

Instantly she was furious. "You!" she said. "I don't know why you hate Roberts, but you're right. I wouldn't believe anything you said about him."

"But you do," said Gale. "Matt has denied knowing me. Yet you have never questioned that there was something between us. Ask yourself why he chooses to lie. Then believe me when I say that he is a thief and a murderer."

"You're crazy," said Prudence. "Matt Roberts a thief and a murderer? Captain Roberts? No. And don't talk about him that way again, Mr. Gale. I'm going to marry him."

Gale wondered why that should concern him, but it did. Whichever way he chose to punish Roberts, he did not want this girl to marry the man. His words were almost pure reflex.

"What you do is your business. But I can't help but feel sorry for the wife and children Roberts left in Boston."

Prudence opened her mouth. The denial came and went in her face, but for seconds the words failed to reach her lips. "A wife? I don't believe you."

"I didn't expect you to," said Gale. "I said you blinded yourself where Roberts is concerned. I'm not concerned about you. I was thinking about his wife. Go ahead and marry him." He started to turn away.

Prudence reached out and caught his arm. "Wait. Please." She seemed so little now and so alone Gale was sorry for his words. He waited, hardly knowing what to do.

Slowly, anger came to her. "So," she

said. "He's married. I should have known. Ever since he came to Carolina, I've sensed a guilt in him, an effort to hide something. It showed in many ways. The way he's treated the miners. The way he's treated my father. I've been blind all right. What a fool I've been."

"Did you think you'd change him by being his wife?" Gale said.

"Yes," she said. "I can change a man. I know it."

Gale laughed at her. "Not a man," he said. "You can't change a man."

Her temper kindled. "I'll fix Roberts. I'll tell everybody in Carolina about him."

Gale shook his head. "What good would that do? Who would believe you? Who'd care? Everyone would just think you were mad because he put one over on you."

"I'll kill him," she said.

"You're always butting in on a man's business," said Gale. "And you're just a hot tempered little girl."

"I'll show you." Her fists came up and she swung at his face.

HE caught her wrists with his big hands, smothering her against him as he had done that night in the cabin. Her face was upturned, her lips a little parted, her eyes hot with anger. He kissed her again, bracing himself for the fight she would make.

For an instant her body was stiff. Then, to his amazement, it softened and pressed against him. Her lips grew warm and when he would have stopped she would not. It was a long time before she let him lift his head.

"Ward!" she said, and buried her face against his chest.

Still holding her, looking down at her hair, Gale found himself shaking. He wanted to shove her away and he could not. "Prudence," he said. "I'm sorry."

She looked up at him. "Don't be sorry, Ward. I'm not. I never expected this to happen. Not to me. All my life I've been lonely. I've followed my father from one town to another. I've had to take care of him. I've never had anyone to take care of me. I guess that's why I was willing to listen to Matt Roberts, to marry him without loving him."

"Wait," said Gale.

"No," she said. "There's never any sense in waiting. The minute you stepped into my cabin, on the boat . . . Oh, Ward, darling."

She stopped there, leaving the rest to him. Thoughts were crowding through Gale's mind. He remembered Ben Derksen's words. "How you going to push him tonight. You can't let him rest a minute."

"Prudence," said Gale. "Would you marry me tonight?"

"Tonight?" She looked up at him breathlessly. "Tonight, Ward?"

He said, "Now. There's a priest at the fire over there."

She said, half to herself, "I'd always pictured my wedding a big one with white dresses." Then she looked around at the Tent, at the corral, at the fire. "This is a strange country," she said. "Things happen so fast, so suddenly. Yes, I'll marry you, Ward. I'll marry you tonight. Get father."

"What if he objects?" said Gale.

"He won't," she said, fiercely. "I won't let him."

"Then let him sleep," said Gale. He took her arm and led her toward the fire.

The priest had little English, but he was a kindly man. He talked of rules to be followed, of banns to be published and looked at the girl's face and forgot them.

By the light of the fire, with the respectful Californios grouped about them, hats in hands, he read the holy service. Neither Gale nor Prudence understood the words. But no one, listening, could mistake the binding vows.

Gale found himself shaking hands with the smiling men, strangers all. They would probably never meet again. Yet he felt a kinship with them which stayed with him even after they had stepped from the firelight.

Having done this thing, and still unable to believe it, he started for the Tent, but Prudence stopped him.

"Ward," she said, surprised. "Wake up. We're married." She turned him toward the darkness.

LATER, when Gale walked back into the men's part of the Tent, he saw Roberts and Conroy stretched out side by side, sleeping. He had an impulse to wake Roberts and tell him. He crowded it down, but he had to talk, he had to tell someone.

The lamps had been turned low and the floor was well covered with blanketed figures. He had difficulty locating Morehouse, but when he did find him, the little man sat up instantly, wide awake. Gale jerked his thumb toward the door.

Morehouse, suspecting trouble, freed his pepperbox and came quickly to his feet, threading his way between the sleepers with the lightness of a cat.

Gale went on ten long paces from the Tent before he stopped. Morehouse closed up behind him, whispering urgently, "What's the matter? What's happened?"

"I'm married," said Gale.

"What of it?" said Morehouse. "The world's full of crazy people. Does that change our plans?"

"I was married tonight," said Gale. "I married Prudence Kellogg."

The little man's jaw went slack. "You what?"

"I married Prudence Kellogg," said Gale.

"But why?" said Morehouse, not whispering now. "You don't know her. You can't love her. Why did you do it?"

"She was going to marry Matt Roberts. I couldn't let her do that."

"So that's it," Morehouse was genuinely shocked. "Good Lord, Ward, do you realize what you've done?"

"I know exactly what I've done," said Gale.

"So do I," said Morehouse. "And I've never heard of a lower piece of business, dragging a woman into your fight with Roberts. I should have let you kill him."

"Wait," said Gale. "You're the one who told me to be hard-headed. To use any means at hand."

"But not this," said Morehouse, strangely agitated. "In this country, Ward, women are something special. There aren't many. Every man in California would turn against you if they learned what you've done tonight. For you own private revenge, to drag a woman into this."

"Look who's talking," said Gale. "You bragged that you had no ethics."

"I haven't," said Morehouse. "I don't even like the girl for the way she's interfered with me. But I respect her as a woman. If I were half the man I ought to be, I'd call you out."

"Listen to me," said Gale. "She was going to marry Roberts. She didn't love him. She admitted it. But she was going to marry him. Think who he is. A murderer. A thief."

"Don't try to justify yourself to me," said Morehouse.

"I don't care what you think, Spence," said Gale. "I'm doing what I have to do. I'll only tell you this. Prudence will never be hurt through any act of mine. Whatever my motives, she's better off married to me than to Matt Roberts."

Morehouse made an impatient motion with his hands and started for the Tent. Before he had gone a half dozen steps, he turned slowly back. "Ward," he said, thoughtfully, "how did you do it? How did you make her change her mind?"

"I told her," said Gale, "that Roberts had a wife and children in Boston."

"Oh," said Morehouse. "Why didn't you say so? I didn't know that."

"Neither did I," said Gale. "But I couldn't let her marry Roberts."

Morehouse looked at him for a long time. Then he slowly shook his head. "Ward, my friend, you've bought yourself an awful lot of trouble tonight. I wouldn't be in your shoes for all the money in Carolina."

V

THINKING a lot, Gale slept little. At daybreak, with men beginning to stir, he rose and made his way to the corral. Derksen still slept heavily, his big body wrapped in his blanket coat, huddled against the stage wheel.

Gale nudged him awake and Derksen was instantly on his feet. "Oh," said Ben. "It's you."

"Go get some breakfast," said Gale. "I'll see Conroy doesn't leave without us."

He leaned idly against the fence, watching the hostlers feed the teams. Conroy moved sleepily toward him, made surly and ill-humored by the stinging cold of the morning air. He passed Gale without a word and entered the corral.

Kellogg stepped into the morning sun, turning toward the women's entrance and Gale watched him closely until he disappeared. A few minutes later, Kellogg came out. The older man was hurrying now, moving more rapidly than Gale had ever seen him.

Suddenly Kellogg stopped, as if he looked for a direction for his haste. Then seeing Gale he came quickly toward the stage.

Gale said, "Good morning," in a neutral tone.

"Ward," said the older man, "I want to talk to you."

"Of course," said Gale. "I expected you to."

"Why did you do it?" said Kellogg.

"Didn't Prudence tell you that?"

"Prudence told me her side. I want yours. I want the truth. I told you last night that I'm a fair judge of men. I told you last night that I thought you were hard and bitter enough to fight Matt Roberts. What's between you and Roberts?"

"Does that matter?"

"It can be very important now." Wilson Kellogg was obviously holding himself in, wanting to be fair. "There's something very serious between you and Roberts. Prudence is my daughter. I think I have a right to know the truth."

Gale breathed deeply. "All right," he said. He told Kellogg, never raising his voice. "When this sailor came back to Boston and told me what happened, I traveled all the way to California to kill Matt Roberts."

"What are you waiting for?" asked Kellogg.

"Because," said Gale. "I have a better idea now."

"I see," said Kellogg. "There could only be one better way; to take from Roberts everything he wants. He wanted Prudence."

"Wait." said Gale.

"You wait," said Kellogg, his frail body straightening. "I don't know why, but she loves you, Ward. I don't know whether you love her or not. I'm not going to ask you. You could lie too easily about that. But if you hurt her, Ward, if you bring her any grief, I'll kill you."

"If I hurt her," said Gale, woodenly, "if I bring her any grief, you do that. I won't try to stop you."

He broke off as the teams were led from the corral and, turning, walked toward the Tent.

When Conroy drove the teams up, Ben Derksen appeared, picking his teeth and blinking into the sun. Morehouse, behind him, hung back. Prudence came from the woman's side, carrying her luggage. Gale took it from her and she squeezed his hand. "Good morning, Mr. Gale," she said, making the name ring. Her face was flushed, her eyes dancing.

Gale smiled at her, murmuring his greeting. He carried the baggage to the rear boot and, opening the flap, stowed it within. At that moment, Roberts came through the door, shouldering Morehouse out of his way, and smiled at Prudence.

"I'll ride with you from here on, my dear," he said, and offered his hand to help her up.

Gale straightened, letting the boot lid drop. "No, Matt," he said, walking up. "I'll ride with my wife. You'll forgive me if I act like a jealous husband."

Roberts half turned, then was suddenly very still. His handsome face tightened and turned gray. "What did you say?"

Gale said, blandly, "Why haven't you heard? Prudence and I were married last night."

The thinly clothed violence in Roberts broke through. Wildness showed in his eyes and he came suddenly at Gale, charging. But Derksen, even though caught flat footed with surprise, proved what Morehouse had said. He threw his big body at Roberts, driving him over against the stage wheel and lifting his shoulder under Roberts' chin, pinned him there. At the same time he dropped his other hand to his gun and looked at Conroy.

"Let him go!" said Gale. "Let him go!"

"No," said Prudence. "Please, Ward."

Behind them, Morehouse said, "Forget it, Ward. Forget it. Don't make it any worse than it is."

"Let him go, Ben," said Gale, in a slower, softer voice. "There'll be no trouble unless he makes it."

Derksen spoke to Roberts. "You feel better now, Matt?"

Roberts moved Ben two feet away with a quick shove. But that was all. He straightened his coat and faced Prudence. "Why did you do it?" he said.

"I know about you, Matt," she told him hotly. "I found out."

"From Gale? And you believed him?"

"I'll always believe him," she said, and smiled up at Gale.

Saying no more, Roberts turned away and took the place beside Bill Conroy. The rest of them climbed in.

CAROLINA was two years old. Of all the camps in the southern mines, it most resembled an Eastern town. Many of the camps were built in twisting, narrow gulches, but Carolina had room to grow and its earliest citizens had come from New England, bringing with them the idea of a town common.

The Square remained, flanked on the east by Washington Street, which had developed into the main thoroughfare. On the west, the boundary was Adams, while north and south, Gold and Silver edged it respectively.

Grouped on these four streets, facing the Square, were the solid businesses of the community. The Union Exchange Hotel and the Holbrook House; Roberts Express and Bank; and Emil Aruup's Trading Company.

Along Washington were the saloons and gambling places. Behind them in a jumbled mass of twisting alleys and dusty courts, lay the Concho, mud-walled and dirty, its denizens never crossing Washington into the better part of town.

The Concho district was Darlington's. His was the biggest saloon, the biggest gambling house. From this place his weight was felt in every crooked alley and cluttered court.

Each sundown he stood in the alley beside his place. Standing there, the sun at his back threw his long shadow across Washington and more respectable men had to walk over it. This, somehow, pleased him.

He was a tall and dark man, thin and sardonic, a man who knew the secrets of this town. He banked these secrets in his mind and let them earn interest against the day he would have to draw on the account.

He saw the stage wheel onto Gold and draw up before the Express Office, and almost ignored it. Then the grouping of the passengers caught his full attention and brought him alert; Roberts riding at Conroy's side, Prudence Kellogg occupying the rear seat between her father and a stranger, while Ben Derksen and Spencer Morehouse held the center place.

Darlington stood motionless and watched Roberts step down with never a backward glance and disappear into the bank beside the Express Office. He watched the stranger help Prudence to the ground, gather up the luggage, pause for a moment to speak to Derksen and Morehouse. Then the group separated, the stranger cutting across the Square with the Kelloggs. They passed the Hangman's Oak, the lone tree in the middle of the Square, and disappeared up Adams.

Morehouse and Derksen came diagonally toward Darlington. But instead of crossing Washington, swung to cross Silver and enter the Holbrook House. Not until they had gone did Darlington stir. Then he turned to enter the side door of the saloon.

His sister Cherry stood in the doorway, watching him. Blond as he was dark, she made a striking figure in her red dress and he had the momentary conviction that there was not a better looking woman in California. He thought, "If I had chosen to be a gentleman, she could have been a queen."

She smiled as he came up. "What interests you tonight, Phil?"

He was evasive from habit. "What makes you think I was interested in anything?"

"Phil," she said, showing him a tenderness no one else had ever seen, "don't talk that way to me. You never stand out there after the sun has gone unless you're interested. What was it?"

"Roberts came in on the stage," he said, his secretiveness making it hard for him to dissimulate. So Cherry kept waiting him out. "Prudence Kellogg came in too. They were in different seats. There was a stranger with her. Morehouse rode the stage, too. Morehouse riding in one of Roberts' wagons." He turned the words over slowly with his mind. "That doesn't make sense."

"Come in out of the night air," said Cherry. "You'll find out about it."

DARLINGTON paused just inside the door, letting his eyes stray from one end of the long room to the other. This was his. From the front windows, with their colored, leaded panes, along the lengthy, glistening bar with its expensive mirrors, to the gambling room at the rear, this was his. Carolina was the richest square mile on earth. But no claim, along its dry gulches, turned out one half the gold that passed across his bar and gaming tables.

As always, he made a slow circuit of the place, Cherry walking beside him. He checked the liquor stocks, inspected the glasses, then tasted a sliver of each of the meats, tasting the turkey twice. Satisfied he moved on to the rear tables where the percentage girls loafed before their evening's work. Each one rose and pivoted slowly before him. When he was satisfied, he turned away from Cherry without a word and took his accustomed place at the end of the long bar. He was ready for the night.

A few customers straggled in, pausing for their first drink at the dark counter. Then the door opened and Ben Derksen came through. Unembarrassed, the fat man lifted a handful of sliced turkey on the way by and came on back. Pausing at Darlington's side, he spoke with his mouth full of meat. "Hello, Phil. How'd you like to invest in a water company?"

Darlington knew Derksen was not speaking to him alone. The fat man's voice was pitched too loud. And it had its effect. The growing noise in the room ceased. "What water company?" said Darlington.

"The Miner's Mutual Water Company," said Ben. "Wilson Kellogg, president." He chuckled and dropped his pretense of talking to Darlington alone and turned to face the room. "See Spencer Morehouse about stock. You better hurry, boys. We sold a lot of shares in Stockton."

Darlington asked, softly, "Does Roberts know?"

Derksen lowered his voice. "He knows all right."

Darlington motioned up a bartender. "What will you have, Ben?"

"Why," said Ben, "I don't care if I do. What was it you wanted to know, Phil?"

The muscles at the corners of Darlington's eyes tightened a little. It had always annoyed him that Derksen, outwardly a simpleton, saw through almost every man's mask.

"Who was the stranger on the stage, Ben?"

"Him?" said Derksen, and emptied his glass. "He's an engineer, I guess. Come to build a water company. He's a man to watch, Phil. He licked Chauncey Burns in Stockton."

"He did?" Darlington did not try to hide his surprise.

"And that ain't all," said Ben, warming up. "He married Prudence Kellogg at Simmons' Tent."

PRUDENCE waited until her father had disappeared into the parlor. Then she said, "We're home, darling," and walked across the room into Gale's arms.

Gale held her close against him, stroking her hair, but he could not put her off forever. He kissed her and her eager response made him ashamed. He was glad when she broke away, tugging at his arm. "Come on," she said. "I'll show you the house."

Picking up her baggage he followed her up the narrow stairway to the two rooms above. "That one," she said, nodding toward the right hand door at the head of the landing, "is father's. This is ours."

The room was obviously a woman's. The bed was a four-poster with a flowered chintz canopy. The curtains matched. He stood there looking at it, feeling alien and out of place. He did what he thought he was supposed to do. He put his arm around her and held her against him.

She talked about their plans. They would have a bigger house. Or perhaps after her father went to the state senate, they would have this house. That was, of course, if Carolina was not chosen the capital.

"But it will be, darling," she said. "The petitions are downstairs. Father's worked for months. There are forty thousand names. They can't refuse when they see those petitions. After all, this is the biggest gold camp in the world. And California's whole economy is tied to gold. Benecia is no good. The capital there is only temporary. The town is built in a swamp. And as for the talk of Sacramento City, what has Sacramento to offer that we haven't."

Gale said, wonderingly, "It means a great deal to you, doesn't it?"

"It means a great deal to father," she said, and grew suddenly serious. "You'll help him, won't you, Ward? All of his life, everything he's tried has turned to failure. He's an old man and this is his last chance."

"I'll help him," said Gale, soberly, and realized with a start that he meant it. For a moment, listening to his wife, he had forgotten everything else.

Still eager, she said, "Right now, I wish there were only the two of us. But it's past supper time. I'll have to change my clothes and get something." She reached down and lifted her skirt over her head.

"While you're changing," said Gale quickly, "I'll go talk to your father."

She said something through the folds of her dress, but he went downstairs, pretending not to hear. Beyond the landing, the parlor door stood open. But Kellogg was not there.

Gale stepped through the doorway, hesitantly. This was the room of another man whom Gale felt was still a stranger to him. He noted the writing table with its pens and ink, the ordered library, neat upon its shelves. And in the far corner the high stacks of the folded petitions with their scribbled names made him conscious of the work Kellogg had done.

"Go on in," said Prudence, behind him. "This is your house, Ward. You act so strange. Didn't you ever have a house?"

Gale shook his head. "Not since I was small," he said. "There was only my brother and myself. He was mostly at sea. So was I, a good part of the time."

She looked at him curiously, realizing how little she knew about this man. Yet, in a way, she felt she had known him always and that her life had been empty until he came along. She was a steadfast person, single-minded in her loyalties, honest with herself and expecting honesty from others. Only with Matt Roberts had she lowered her standards and she loved this big man more for saving her from that.

She moved into the doorway and surveyed the room. "Where's father?"

"He must have gone out," said Gale.

A shadow darkened the girl's eyes. "I wish he hadn't. Not tonight. I wanted the three of us to have our first supper together."

"He'll be back," said Gale.

"Yes," she said, and moved on to the kitchen.

WATCHING her go, Gale thought how small she looked, almost like a little girl. She had changed from her traveling clothes to a house dress of crisp, starched gingham. Her hair was pulled back, severely, and tied with a small ribbon at the nape of her neck, but its natural curl flowed out over her shoulders.

Nervously, he looked for a cigar and found one on Kellogg's writing table. He had smoked it almost to the end and the house was filled with the savory odors of his wife's cooking when the front door opened.

He looked up, expecting Kellogg to appear in the room door. It was Morehouse and the little man looked worried. "There you are," he said, with no pleasure. "It isn't my fault."

"What?" said Gale. "Where's Kellogg?"

"He's on the front steps," said Morehouse. "He's ashamed to come in."

Gale brushed past him and went out the front door. Wilson Kellogg sat on the steps with his back to the porch post. He was bent over, his head buried in his hands.

"Wilson," said Gale. "What is it? Get up."

Kellogg rose with exaggerated dignity, putting one hand against the post to steady himself. "I tell you sir," he said, "Matt Roberts is a dog. A despicable, yellow dog."

Prudence pushed Morehouse aside and came up against Gale's arm. "Father!" she said.

"It's all right, my dear," said Kellogg. "It's quite all right." He started a weaving path toward the front door.

"Help him," Prudence ordered Gale.

Gale scooped the man up in his arms. "I'll take care of him," he said, and carried him up the stairs.

When he came back down again, Morehouse was still there, pacing back and forth across the parlor, Prudence watching him silently.

"All right, Spence," said Gale. "What was it this time?"

"We're all through," said Morehouse, and made no effort to keep the bitter tone from his voice. "We're through before we ever got started. Roberts moved too fast for us."

"What did he do?"

"He cut his water rates. I expected him to do that, but I thought he would wait a week or two until he was certain whether or not we were really a serious threat. I meant to move fast. I meant to get as much of the stock sold as I could." He broke off and looked at Gale, accusingly. "But you had to stir him up too much."

Gale said, "I wasn't asking about Roberts. What happened to Wilson?"

"There's nothing important about that," said Morehouse. "But he was in Darlington's. We both were. Roberts had men all over town circulating the news of the cut water rates. We went to Darlington's to try and talk it down. It was Darlington who got Wilson started. He does that when he wants a man to talk or to shut him up."

"So this is the end of your fine scheme," said Gale. "It didn't get very far, did it?"

Prudence looked from one to the other, incredulous. "You mean you're going to stop merely because Matt cut his water rates. Anyone would know he would do that."

Morehouse said, impatiently, "What else can we do? You know the miners as well as I do. They're gamblers. They live from day to day. Do you think anyone would invest in another water company when Roberts is going to sell water as cheaply as we can?"

"But it won't last," said Prudence. "You know he'll raise his rates again."

"Sure," said Morehouse. "But he won't raise his rates until we're done and gone from here. Don't you see what this means, Prudence? We have to get out of here." A faint sneer twisted his lips. "You know Matt."

She looked at Gale. "Are you afraid of Roberts, Ward?"

"No," said Gale.

"Then fight him," she said fiercely. "Call the miners together. Have a meeting. I have more faith in their common sense than Mr. Morehouse does. At least make the effort. At least don't run."

"I have no intention of running," said Gale. "I don't know what good a miners' meeting will do, but we'll try it. We'll try anything. But I'll tell you this, as long as Matt Roberts is in Carolina, I'll be here, too."

"Here, maybe," said Morehouse. "But will you ever go out onto the street at night?"

Gale looked at him. "Arrange for the miners' meeting, Spence. Now, tell me where to find this Darlington."

Prudence caught his arm. "What about Darlington? What are you going to do?"

"Talk to him," said Gale. "I'll be back, later. Come on, Spence." Without a hat he turned toward the door.

IDLING at the end of his bar, Phil Darlington felt Cherry press against his shoulder. For the past two hours she had worn a thoughtful expression on her face and he had waited. Now she said, "I've been wondering what kind of a man this Ward Gale could be to beat Matt Roberts' time."

"Here comes Geoffry Allison," he said. "We'll ask him."

He watched Allison come in and stop at the crowded bar, amused at how the meticulous banker picked the widest, vacant place. Allison was a strange man. Running Matt Roberts' bank, he had proven himself smart and shrewd. He held himself aloof from everyone, and his habits were utterly regular.

Each night, at nine, he carefully closed the bank, walked slowly down the length of Gold, crossed and followed Washington until he reached Darlington's. Turning in he had his one drink. Then, without a word to anyone, he retraced his steps, passed the bank, and entering the Union Exchange, climbed to his room. In the year Darlington had watched him, the man had always followed the set pattern of the streets. Never once had he cut diagonally across the Square. But in spite of this, Darlington sensed an itch inside the man, some passion he struggled against. Someday that thing would break through and Darlington often wondered what course the flood would take.

Usually the gambler honored Allison's obvious desire for solitude, permitting himself only a curt nod of recognition. But tonight he broke the rule and moved down the bar to Allison's side, Cherry following.

"Evening, Allison," he said.

Allison started to frown, then his eyes moved beyond Darlington. He lifted his hat and said, "Good evening, Miss Darlington. Good evening, Phil."

Darlington signaled the bartender. "This one's on the house."

"Thank you," said Allison. He smiled faintly. "It's been a wearing evening."

Darlington said idly, "I can imagine, with Roberts cutting his water rates. What made him do that? This new engineer, Gale?"

"He's no engineer," said Allison. "The man's a swindler. A friend of Spencer Morehouse."

"What does a swindler look like?" asked Cherry.

"I don't know," said Allison. "I've never seen him."

"If you'd turn around," said Darlington, "you can see him. He just came in the front door."

Allison looked around. Spencer Morehouse was coming along the bar, a tall, rangy, redheaded man pacing beside him. And Allison disliked the redhead instantly when Cherry Darlington said, "There comes a man, Phil. You can pick them out a long way off. There aren't many in this world."

Her brother had no chance to answer. Morehouse had paused before him. "Hello, Darlington," he said.

Darlington said, softly, "You still in town, Spencer?"

Gale swept Morehouse gently aside. "Why wouldn't he be, Darlington?"

"I don't know," said Darlington. "It was just a remark."

"Mr. Gale," said Cherry, quickly. "You're a stranger in town. Let me show you the house."

Gale looked at her. "No," he said.

"Gale," said Darlington, reprovingly, "my sister, Cherry."

Gale gave the girl a longer look, impressed by what he saw. She met his eyes squarely, a little mockingly. "How do you do," Gale said.

Darlington, faintly amused now, said, "And Mr. Gale. Have you met Geoffry Allison? Geoffry Allison is an important man in camp. He runs the Roberts' Bank. Mr. Allison, Mr. Gale."

Geoffry Allison was embarrassed. Gale gave him a curt nod and showed no other interest and Darlington made a note of the effect the slight had on the man. The banker was proud, he thought, and had a tender skin.

Morehouse, bright and watchful, said, "This is not a social call."

"That's right," said Gale.

"What's the matter?" said Darlington. "Don't you like our place?" He was stiff and offended.

"I don't like the way it's run," said Gale. "You got Wilson Kellogg drunk tonight."

Darlington said softly, "I never interfere with the habits of my customers. In this country, Mr. Gale, a man does what it pleases him to do. This is a public bar. If a man wants to drink, that is his privilege."

"Not," said Gale, "when he is my father-in-law. Don't serve him again."

"And if I do?"

Gale said, without any anger. "Running a place like this, you're too smart to ask that kind of a question." He motioned to Morehouse. "Come on, Spence."

Allison stepped a little aside to let them pass. Darlington was silent. Cherry said, a little breathlessly, "I told you he was a man. And he's dangerous, too. If he told me to do something, I'd do it."

Allison turned and stared after Gale with an unprecedented show of interest. Remembering what Cherry had just said, he was suddenly jealous. But his analytical mind considered the possibilities of such a situation and found them interesting.

Unconscious of this interest, Gale moved out onto Washington and stood with his back to the lighted windows, staring out across the dark Square with its brooding Hangman's Oak.

"How soon can we call a miners' meeting, Spence?"

"It won't do any good," said Morehouse.

"I didn't ask you that."

"Tomorrow night," said Morehouse, crossly, "if I send out riders. Did you ever see a more beautiful woman than Cherry Darlington?"

"Huh?" said Gale. "What are you talking about?"

"Some day," said Morehouse, "I'm going to have to kill Geoffry Allison. I don't like the way he looks at her."

VI

AT SIX o'clock the next evening, Gale and Prudence left the house and moved down Adams Street toward the already crowded Square. Prudence clung proudly to Gale's arm.

"Don't worry, Ward," she said. "You've never heard my father speak. The miners believe in him."

"We'll see," said Gale, as they came into the Square and turned along Silver to the steps of Aruup's store.

The lean, stooped figure of the merchant stood in the door opening and he raised his hat. "Good evening, Prudence."

"Good evening," she said. "Have you met my husband?"

"This afternoon," said Aruup, and gave Gale his dry, friendly smile. "You

better stay here with me, Prudence. You can see from these steps."

"A good idea," said Gale, and moved away into the crowd.

All day, riders had ridden the rough country, combing the dry gulches, carrying the word of the meeting to the farthest camp of the mining district. To Gale the reaction was amazing. The Square was packed, giving him his first inkling of how many people lived in the surrounding hills, his first inkling of the burning interest the miners took in their affairs. This was truly democracy at work.

He pushed his way through the crowd toward the bandstand beside the Hangman's Oak. Kellogg was already on the platform talking to the alcalde and the chiefs of the volunteer fire departments. At the rear of the raised floor, Schultz's Silver Cornet Band were testing their horns and lungs. Above the sound and the swelling murmur of the crowd, Kellogg greeted him.

"Here you are, Ward." He put a hand on Gale's shoulder. "Gentlemen, my son-in-law."

Wilson Kellogg had been born to stand before crowds. A slight man, ordinarily drab, physically colorless, like an actor he came to life only before an audience. This was his proper place, standing before the miners who loved him, ready to make the speech of the evening.

He turned and signaled Marvin Schultz. The bandleader waved his horn. The music started. The audience fell silent. When the last note floated out, Kellogg raised his hand.

"Fellow citizens of the future state capital of California, I call you together once more. You honor me by your response."

He stopped as wave on wave of cheers beat against the building fronts facing the Square. Gale was amazed at the magnetic spell this slight man had upon the crowd.

"Eight months ago," said Kellogg, "I pointed out that the ruinous water rates were strangling the growth of this community and that there was only one solution, that we must build a competing ditch. A ditch owned by you miners to service you with your own water. Those plans are now formulated. A company has been organized. Already a number of shares have been sold. An engineer has come in to oversee the work. Modesty forbids me to dwell upon his virtues, since on the journey from San Francisco, he became a member of my family."

Here again he was forced to pause. These miners, living often for months in lonely isolation, seeing a woman but seldom, loved the thought of a wedding. Shouts rose from the crowd.

"Let's see the bridegroom."

"Let's hear him talk."

Kellogg motioned and Gale rose, unwillingly. It had been no part of his plan to talk. But he could not deny the crowd. He looked down upon the bearded faces, then over toward Aruup's store. Prudence waved and he raised his hand in return. He came back to the miners, then.

"Last night," he said, "your water rates were reduced and there was only one reason for that reduction. Matt Roberts feared the competition of the new water company and hoped to stop it before we ever got started. He won't." He brought a fist smashing down upon the railing of the stand. "No matter what he does, he won't stop it. Somehow, some way, I will build another water ditch."

HE stepped back and they cheered him as if they recognized in his brevity a stubborn purpose. Before Kellogg could rise to take back the meeting, Geoffry Allison swung up the platform steps and turned to face the crowd.

"A moment, please!" Matt Roberts' banker never lost his studied dignity. "This is an open miners' meeting. I have a right to be heard." His voice was calm and clipped and assured.

"Go ahead!" shouted someone.

"This second water company is going to cost a fortune. Mr. Kellogg mentioned that they had already sold some stock. What he has failed to mention is that they need to sell thousands of additional shares in order to complete their ditch." He turned. "Is that right, Mr. Gale?"

"Certainly," said Gale. "Every man out there knows that."

"You see," said Allison. "It's money they're asking for. When Matt Roberts built his ditch, he used his own funds. Without that ditch, this camp never would have grown. Now he has paid off part of his investment, Mr. Roberts

has voluntarily lowered your rates. But these men, these penniless adventurers are asking you to give gold into their hands. Gold you dug out of the ground. Gold you slaved for. Gold you came six thousand miles to gain. Now they're asking you to give it to them. I don't believe you're that foolish."

Allison drew no cheers. It was the silence he caused that worried Gale. He looked appealingly at Kellogg and knew instantly they had lost. Kellogg had the feel of crowds, the sense of the mob reaction. The man made no effort to rise. It was Morehouse who stepped up.

Small, almost dainty, he stood alone at the platform's edge and the silence came up as if to push him back. But he merely smiled down, rocking slowly on his small feet, standing there so long, that everyone was forced to look at him.

"We've heard a lot of words tonight," he said, in a conversational tone. "As speeches, they should be written down and preserved. Not for their factual content, but for their beautiful rhetoric." He paused and smiled as if he shared a joke with them and they snickered back at him.

"But we didn't come here to listen to beautiful phrases. We came here to discuss facts. And so far, facts have been strangely missing. This is the richest square mile in the world. That is a fact. You made it so by your labor. That is a fact. And out of every dollar that you have produced, you have been forced to pay an exorbitant portion because Matt Roberts controls the water. That is a fact.

"But water runs free in the Stanislaus. Other people in the world have the foresight of Matt Roberts. These men are not unfamiliar with the situation in Carolina. For a long time, they have planned to get a foothold in the mining country. They control some of the biggest banks in the world. And right now, one of their representatives is in San Francisco, waiting for word from me. That is a fact."

He moved back, raising his hands as a signal he was through.

Allison stepped into the doubtful pause. "A pretty speech," he said. "But curiously lacking in the very facts Morehouse talks about. I dare him to mention the name of this mysterious, international bank that is so eager to come into Carolina."

Morehouse straightened his coat, then said blandly to Allison, "Thanks for calling the oversight to my attention. I did neglect to mention the banker's name. Perhaps some of you never heard of them. I'm speaking of the House of Rothschild."

Allison started. Over his calm, white face came a look of unaccustomed surprise. He masked it quickly. "You're joking."

"I never joke," said Morehouse, hugely pleased with himself. He turned and lifted a hand to Marvin Shultz. The band started up and closed the meeting out.

WHEN the music was done, the miners turned toward the saloons across Washington Street. During the meeting the places of entertainment had been deserted and each doorway was filled with watching bartenders, dealers and girls.

The lower denizens of the Concho choked the alley entrances, staring curiously across the deadline at what was happening in the Square.

Darlington and his sister stood a little apart, listening with close attention to the distant words, weighing their effect upon the crowd. They too were involved, for their fortunes were linked closely with those of Roberts and they knew that their very existence depended upon the whims of those in power.

During Allison's speech, Darlington smiled. But after Spencer Morehouse had begun to talk, he turned, frowning and at the mention of the House of Rothschild, he said quietly, "I wonder if he's lying?"

"If he is," said Cherry, "he's running a good bluff. We could use that man, Phil."

"No," said Darlington. "He would never work for anyone except himself. But he's smart. He saved the meeting tonight. Allison had them convinced. Now they're not sure."

But Cherry wasn't listening. Gale and Morehouse had left the platform and with Derksen opening a path for them, made their way across the Square to where Prudence waited.

"I told you everything would be all right," she said. "You wanted to give up too easily."

Morehouse gave her his slow, secretive smile. Gale said, "I'll take you

home. Then I have to come back downtown. Spencer has opened an office next to the Holbrook House. We should be there to talk to anyone interested." He turned to Morehouse. "Get hold of Wilson and keep him with you. I'll be back in a few minutes."

Prudence said to Morehouse, "Why didn't you tell us about outside bankers being interested? When my father went to San Francisco to talk to bankers, you ruined his chances and made me think badly of you."

"I'd do it again," said Morehouse, thinking fast. "If you heard what I said, we don't want outside bankers in here. We want this ditch to be owned by the miners. We'll only call in the banks as a last resort." He turned quickly away before she could continue.

Gale frowned over the exchange and was unusually silent during the walk home. He was troubled by Spencer's actions, but he was more troubled by his wife's attitude when he left her at the house.

She kissed him. "Please don't be late," she said. "I'm getting tired of this water ditch. It takes your time. I hardly see you. It's even hard to realize we're married."

"You want the ditch, too," he said, with unnecessary brusqueness, and saw the hurt in her eyes. "I'll get back as soon as I can."

He left the house and walked rapidly back to the Square. The new water company office was thronged with men. But looking around, Gale realized there were few miners present. Here was the alcalde, the firemen and members of the band making holiday on the whiskey Morehouse had furnished. These were not investors. He signaled the small man and, together, they stepped out onto the street and moved slowly up the dark sidewalk.

"If the miners believed what you said," said Gale, "you've put us in a beautiful hole. No one will want to invest. They'll let your mysterious banker do it. House of Rothschild, indeed."

"Look," said Morehouse. "Will you be practical? Roberts and Allison already had us beaten. I pulled it out of the fire. We still have a chance. Roberts doesn't know whether I'm lying or not."

"I know you're a liar," said Gale. "Rothschild has no representatives in San Francisco."

"Maybe yes, maybe no. They have representatives all over the world. But that isn't the important thing. Our one remaining chance is to stampede the miners into buying stock. If they think other people are interested, they'll be more eager to invest."

It was logical and Gale had no answer at the moment. They walked on in silence. Morehouse finally said, "There's a thing that bothers me, Ward. A minute ago you called me a liar. That's all right. But not the way you said it. I remember you married Prudence Kellogg at Simmons' Tent. Don't call me a liar again."

Gale reached out and laid a rough hand on Spencer's shoulder. Morehouse made no effort to jerk away. For an instant they stood thus, in the half darkness, then Gale let his hand fall.

"All right," Spence," he said. "Maybe you're right. Maybe not."

ROBERTS stood at the darkened window of his room on the top floor of the Union Exchange Hotel. The whole building was his, as was most of the property on this side of the Square and he had fitted the rooms up without regard to cost. There was nothing finer, even in San Francisco.

From this vantage point he looked out across the town, calculating its growth and turning that growth to his advantage. He was frowning now as he watched the miners flow out of the Square.

Forever alert to any threat against his position, he had to take Morehouse seriously. To do otherwise would be too much of a gamble. And Matt Roberts never took a chance if he could do a thing a safer way. Retreating to his writing table, he penned a note to his agents in San Francisco. This would go out on the morning stage.

That done, he returned to the window and stood there until the crowd had dissolved even from the saloons and the last departing miners had vanished toward the hills. Then he descended to the deserted street and made his way across Washington and into Darlington's.

Already the big overhead lamps had been turned low. A few stragglers lingered at the bar or made one last chance at the tables. The tired girls were gone and Darlington and Cherry sat at the

rear, tallying the nights receipts. This was a chore Darlington enjoyed and never left to others. He had a real love of money. He liked to handle it. It annoyed him to be interrupted at this pleasant task and he did not trouble to hide his annoyance as he raised his eyes to Roberts'.

"You here?"

Matt Roberts seldom crossed Washington Street. Although much of the property flanking the twisting alleys was his he left the control of the district to Darlington. Theirs was an unwritten partnership. Roberts had no direct financial interest in the gambling hall, but he did derive large revenues from the rental of his buildings and it was to his advantage that the district be well handled.

This was an understanding then between them, and at certain times Roberts had called upon Darlington for aid just as the gambler had invoked Roberts' help occasionally in dealing with the authorities. Therefore, Roberts had no hesitation in speaking openly, even with Cherry present.

Unasked he sat down and said, "Did you hear the speeches tonight?"

"I heard them," said Darlington.

"Gale," said Roberts, "has to go."

"It was Morehouse who spoke about the bankers," Darlington said.

"Morehouse is smart," admitted Roberts. "But Gale is the dangerous one. Find a man who can catch him in the hills. Let him understand that Gale's body is not to be discovered. I want it to appear that Gale ran away. Some money will disappear from my bank at the same time. I want Gale branded as a thief."

"Ah," said Darlington. "You hate him."

"No," said Roberts. "It's merely good business that he should disappear."

"I'm not a child, Matt," said Darlington. "Don't tell me that. He married your woman."

Roberts shoved back his chair. "Keep your nose out of my affairs," he said.

"I see what I see," said Darlington. "It's her you want convinced. You don't care whether the miners think Gale is a thief or not."

"Do what I say," said Roberts.

"Sure," said Darlington. "I'll do what you say, as long as it serves our purpose."

Roberts looked at the man for a long time. "Be sure of that," he said.

Not until he had disappeared through the doorway, did Darlington speak. Then he glanced reflectively at his sister. "You're twenty-three," he said. "It's time you were married."

Startled, Cherry looked at him, searchingly. "What are you thinking about now?"

"I was thinking," said Phil, "that Roberts needs a woman. If you married him, this whole town would belong to us."

"Do you want the town that bad, Phil?"

"No," he said, instantly. "It was just a thought."

"Do you want to see me happy, Phil?"

"Yes. I wish there was a way to make you happy. That's the only thing I dislike about my position here. The slights you are forced to endure from the hypocrites on the other side of Washintgon Street."

"They're not important," she told him. "If you want to make me happy, don't do what Roberts asks. Don't kill the redhead."

Darlington studied her. "Gale's married," he said.

"I'm not so sure. There's more to marriage than the ceremony. Don't do what Roberts said."

Darlington bowed his head. "If that's the way you feel."

She reached across the table and pressed his hand. "Thanks, Phil. I don't ask for many things."

Thoughtfully, he watched her cross the room and mount the stairs to their quarters above. When she was gone, he sighed and motioned to the head bartender. "Find Charley."

The man removed his spotted apron and left the saloon. Darlington sat in the half dark, waiting, fondling the stacks of gold on the table. It was a full half hour before the bearded man drifted in through the side door. He glanced around, uncertain, then sidled over to the table.

"It's all right, Charley," said Phil. "Sit down."

Charley Royer slipped into a chair. His eyes fixed on the stacked gold and he licked his lips. "What do you want?"

Wordlessly, Darlington counted out five square slugs. He weighed them in his hand, then spread them before

Royer. "The man," he said, "is Gale. Get him in the hills. I don't want his body found."

GALE lay awake through the long dark hours of the night, unmoving. In her sleep, Prudence had put an arm across him and her palm lay caressingly against his cheek. He could not move without waking her and his muscles grew rigid with their unaccustomed stillness.

This could have been so different, for she was the most attractive woman he had ever known. If they could have met in Boston, met before he started to search for Roberts. No man could have asked for a better wife. Prudence had everything a man wished for in a woman, but rarely found, and Gale savored the bitter irony of knowing he had found her too late for him.

This evening when he had returned to the house, he had been tempted to tell her the truth, but her degree of trust in him had made the words impossible. She had talked happily of their plans and, afterward, lying in his arms, had voiced her full content. Then she had fallen asleep, curled against his shoulder, holding him. He knew that should be the end of the story, but for them it was merely a tragic beginning.

He wondered if he could bear her contempt if she ever found out, and he wondered how long he could put her off, being so close to her. As the gray morning light outlined the window, he rose, dressing quietly. When he turned back, Prudence was wide awake.

"So early?" she said, her eyes warm with sleep.

"I've got to get away," he said.

"Away?" She sat up, bundling the covers around her. "What for?"

"The ditch will begin at the Stanislaus," he said. "Not here. Someone has to make the survey."

"What about Morehouse?"

Gale shook his head. "Spencer's needed in town. It's up to me." He turned quickly toward the door, but she stopped him.

"You forgot to kiss me."

Hesitantly, he came back to the bed, troubled. He took her shoulders in his big hands and bent down until his lips were against hers. When he straightened, he was shaken and the girl sensed the uncertainty in him.

"What's the matter, Ward? Is there something wrong with me?"

He managed to smile. "Of course not," he said. "There's just so much that has to be done."

"Ward," said Prudence, "let's not ever have so much to do, that we have no time for each other."

"I'll try," he said. "But right now . . ." He turned away then and left the house.

Walking rapidly downtown he climbed to the second floor of the hotel and routed out Morehouse.

"What the devil you doing up this time of the morning?" the little man complained. "Don't you ever stay in bed?"

"There's something to do," said Gale. "I want a horse. I want you to draw me a map of the country; you must have some idea where this ditch should go."

"Kellogg had a survey run," said Morehouse. "Get the map from him."

[*Turn page*]

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"You get it," said Gale. "I'll meet you at the livery in half an hour."

Morehouse sat back down on the edge of the bed and stared up at him. "What are you up to? Did you have a fight with Prudence?"

"Of course not." Gale was impatient.

"Something's wrong," said Morehouse. "You're running away. There's no need of you going out into the hills. We can send Derksen. Your place is here, helping me raise money."

Gale shook his head. "You and Kellogg can do that better than I can. I have to get away, Spence. I want a chance to think."

"It's a little late to start thinking, isn't it?" said Morehouse. "You should have done your thinking at Simmons' Tent, before you married her."

"You look out for yourself," said Gale. "I'll look out for me. And by the way. If you collect any money while I'm gone, you be sure that it's here when I get back."

Spencer's smile was barbed. "You look out for yourself," he said. "I'll look out for me. If you're worried about me and any money I might colect, maybe you'd better stay here in town, with your lovely wife, and watch me."

Gale hit him with his open hand. Spencer's head rocked to one side, but he made no move to defend himself. He sat for a long time, staring up at the bigger man. Slowly he rubbed his reddened cheek and said, "I'm sorry, Ward." It was impossible to judge what he meant. "I'll get the map. There's some notes I have, too." Crossing to a chest of drawers he took out a leather-bound field book and handed it to Ward.

"Spence . . ." Gale said, staring at the book.

"Forget it," said Morehouse. "Don't give it another thought."

"I realize," said Gale, doggedly, "that I'm leaving you the bad end of the job. After the speech you made last night, everybody will be watching you. If your banker fails to show up . . ."

"Don't worry," said Morehouse. "I'll make out. I'll make out. I'll do my thinking first, so I won't have any regrets later."

GALE camped that night at Dead Man's Bar with four miners who were ground sluicing. Their shack was tight and well built and they were congenial. After the pan biscuits and bear steak had been put away, Gale sat back with a scalding cup of strong coffee and questioned them.

They knew the country well. They knew the basin twenty miles up the North Fork which would serve for the dam site. None, of course, knew the grades and contours accurately enough to be certain that water could be brought down by a gravity flow ditch. But one of the miners had been a lawyer and he outlined the position, graphically.

"It's more than an engineering problem," he told Gale. "Roberts, by right of possession, owns the right-of-way on which his flume is carried. In order for you to come into Carolina with a gravity flow ditch, it will be necessary for you to cross the Roberts' right-of-way."

"We'll cross it," said Gale.

"You'll have to use one of two methods," said the lawyer. "One is by force. The second by law. By law it will be a long, drawn out process."

"We'll cross," Gale said, "one way or another," and they liked the way he said it.

Gale could be a ready talker when he chose and he talked now. It was a relief to talk to men, to put the thoughts of Prudence out of his mind.

He was up before daylight, picking his way along the canyon rim, following the line of Roberts' flume, studying the workmanship and marveling at the difficulties that had been overcome. This was no simple operation. It was a problem to tax the ingenuity of any man.

By the third night he had a good general idea of the country. Constantly he was surprised by the number of people he met in the timbered hills. Each sand bar had its quota of gold miners lifting water from the river with their Chinese water wheels, using it to sluice out their gravel.

They were men from all walks of life, from all experiences. Laborers. Doctors. Even ministers.

Roberts' dam was a log structure, earth filled and very tight. The intake ditch came off three hundred feet above the dam and by drilling, Roberts had lowered a natural break in the rock wall. Thence the ditch followed the canyon side at a much more gradual pitch than the river so that it came level with the rim, east of Carolina. From there it was flumed across a steep gulch on a

timbered trestle, went through a sharp cut in the limestone shoulder and came out on the hillside a good four hundred feet above town, running down in an open earth ditch to another trestle at Yankee Hill.

But the problem for the second ditch was not so simple. Gale found the basin which the miners had described and knew it well suited to his purpose. Then using the notes of Kellogg's survey, he back-tracked, criss-crossing the rough country, hunting for a workable grade.

His horse went a little lame, and he worked two days on foot, but he found what he wanted. The pitch of the North Fork canyon was sharper than that of the middle stream and not so deep. He could lift his flume over the canyon wall within ten miles of the dam site, carry it along a hogback, bridge three gulches and run down a natural wash to the Middle Fork canyon where he would be five hundred feet above the tumbling stream.

He would turn and follow the canyon wall to the point where Roberts' ditch branched off for Carolina. It would be necessary then to build a bridge to cross Roberts' flume and come in to the north of it, recrossing the flume below Yankee Hill.

There was one difficulty. Roberts had come down the south wall of the canyon which sloped sufficiently to carry his ditch. But on the side Gale would be forced to use, the rock face, in places, fell abruptly for a thousand feet. There was only one solution, to hang the flume from this rock face, using iron supports.

ON his last night out, the first he had camped alone, Gale sat staring into his tiny fire. The magnitude of the problem had captured his interest and he came to with a start to realize that for at least twenty-four hours he had given no thought to his hatred of Matt Roberts. There would be a satisfaction in building this ditch for the mere sake of building.

He was up at daybreak, turning his horse toward town. The rising hills boxed him in, and the scent of the pines was sweet. He began to understand his wife's love for this country. It grew on a man. It would be nice to ride these hills with her, to sit with her by a fire at night, but those were impossible thoughts. There was nothing beyond his settlement with Matt Roberts. These last ten days had brought no answer to the real problem he had set out to think about.

At noon, he reached the Middle Fork, let his horse drink, stripped off his clothes and plunged into the rushing water. It battered at his body, sending him against the stones and he fought it, enjoying the stimulating freedom. Then, refreshed, he dressed and took the curving trail upward toward the distant rim.

When he topped out of the canyon he dismounted to let the horse rest, and as he did so he jumped as a boy slipped silently out of the bushes.

"Hiya!" said the youngster. He had a full game sack on his shoulder and a long rifle in the crook of his arm.

"Hello," said Gale. "Where you from?"

"Carolina town. I'm hunting. I hunt for Frenchy's Restaurant."

Gale said, idly, "What's the news in town?"

The boy dropped his sack and hunkered down on his heels. "Nothin' much." Then he brightened. "They're having fights tonight. Yankee Sullivan and the Philadelphia Kid, with a bear and bull bait, first. Sullivan will beat him."

"That all?"

"Well, there's a new bank."

"What new bank?"

The boy ran his hand through his tousled hair. "Them Rothschild fellows, from over Europe way. Paw says Matt Roberts don't like 'em none too well."

Gale started with surprise. "The Rothschilds? How far is it to town?"

"About four miles," said the boy. "Some call it five."

Gale rose and swung up into the saddle. "Be seeing you. Luck."

"So long, mister," said the boy. "See you at the fights, huh?"

"Sure," said Gale, and urged his tired horse forward, wondering what Morehouse had done now.

The trail was rough and the horse had a tendency to falter, but Gale pushed it on, driven by impatience. A little while later he came out into a bare space a good two hundred yards across, a natural cup surrounded by high, timbered ridges.

Crossing this, the animal began to limp again and Gale was forced to dismount.

As he swung down, a rifle cracked from the ridge to the right, and a bullet whined across the saddle he had just emptied. Startled, the horse reared, almost jerking Gale from his feet. He fought the reins, desperately, trying to drag the animal down. His own rifle was in the saddle boot.

The gun from the ridge spoke again. The heavy slug made a wet sound as it struck the plunging horse. The animal screamed, pawed two staggering steps and fell beside a low brush clump.

Gale dived behind the fallen horse. He dragged the rifle from the saddle boot and laid the barrel across the animal's carcass. Laying his cheek against the stock, he studied a drifting whisp of smoke on the ridge and waited.

NOTHING happened. When he felt the strain too long, he inched up for a better look. The rifle cracked again, this time behind him. The bullet bored through the brush at his ear. Gale dropped flat and edged around the horse. The fourth shot came within inches of his boot toe, from a different direction.

Trapped in the open, with that unseen rifleman free to move about, Gale knew he had no chance, and realizing it, he lost all physical fear. What came to him now were three deep regrets. He should have killed Roberts on the river boat. Failing to do that he should have been more careful. And, he should have never married Prudence Kellogg. That had been the greatest mistake. There had been no need to hurt the girl. She was the last person in the world he would see hurt, and he suddenly knew that it was much more important to keep her from being hurt than it was to get Roberts. And he had to admit there was only one reason why he felt this. There was only one emotion stronger than hate. That was love.

The irony of making this discovery now was doubly bitter. She was his wife. he had held in his arms, but never once during their relationship had he ever told her he loved her. Now that chance was gone. A bullet sliced the shirt across his shoulder.

He squirmed further around the dead animal and saw the field book sticking from the burst saddlebag. Cautiously, he worked it free. There was little time to write and little space. He wrote on the fly leaf.

Prudence:

I love you. No matter what you hear or what men say, I love you. Spencer Morehouse thinks I married you to hurt Matt Roberts. He might even tell you that now to ease your grief. But even though it might cause you more grief, Spencer is wrong. Take comfort in the knowledge that my last thoughts were all of you. I did lie about Matt Roberts at the Tent. He has no wife. But I had to change your mind. Whatever happens, I could not have you married to that man.

Your husband,
Ward.

VII

FOR the first time in his life, Spencer Morehouse was troubled. Day after day he sat alone in the office of the new water company, waiting for the investors who had failed, so far, to appear. Only a few thousand dollars' worth of stock had been sold and the miners, while they showed a lively interest in the water company's doings, were holding back, enjoying Matt Roberts' enforced generosity and beginning to express their doubts about foreign bankers being interested in Carolina.

Morehouse guessed shrewdly that these doubts had been planted in the men's minds by Roberts' agents. Having always earned his living by his wits, he knew, only too well, what he would have done in Roberts' place.

Also he understood the miners thoroughly. They were hanging back, waiting for someone to make the first move. If he could only produce a foreign banker, then he could see himself swamped with men seeking to invest, afraid that the opportunity would pass them by. But how to produce a banker, when he knew none, was quite a problem.

Both Kellogg and his daughter had already questioned him and he had succeeded in evading a direct answer. Now time was running out. He glanced at his watch and saw that the afternoon stage was due and, as he had done each day since Gale had ridden into the hills, he rose and walked outside.

A slim cheroot clamped in his thin lips, he stood with his back to the sun, staring diagonally across the Square toward the express office. He was un-

conscious of the fact that Darlington stood behind him in the alley's mouth, watching as he always did, the stage's arrival.

Cherry joined her brother Phil and fastened her attention on Morehouse's small, immaculate figure. "What's he up to, Phil?"

"Who?" Darlington's thoughts had been with Charley, in the hills. Gale had been gone four days now.

"Spencer Morehouse. For the last four days he's watched the stage come in. It isn't like you to fail to notice things. What's wrong with you, Phil?"

"I saw him the first day," said Darlington. "He's pretending to watch for his banker."

"What if his banker does come in?"

"It wouldn't do any good. There won't be a second ditch."

"I'm not so sure," Cherry told him. "That redhead's been out surveying."

"That's what Morehouse says." Darlington spoke without looking at her. "But how do we know he's surveying? I think maybe he's run out. I don't think he'll ever come back."

Cherry looked at him, sharply. She started to say something then changed her mind and said, instead, "He'll be back, unless something happened to him and nothing had better happen to him, Phil. Remember that." She did not wait for the stage's arrival, but went back into the saloon, leaving her brother alone with his discomforting thoughts.

FAR out on the road that came into Adams Street, a sudden flash of reflected sun told Morehouse the stage was coming in. Always before he had remained standing on the wooden walk before the water company office. But today he started diagonally across the Square, hardly conscious that he was moving until he had passed the bandstand.

The stage turned the corner with a flourish, the driver sawing back on his long lines to bring the six panting horses to a plunging stop before the Express Office. Morehouse elbowed his way in, centering his attention on one of the passengers and excitement rode up in him.

He was a man who had always played his hunches and he had the feeling of being right, now. Four of the passengers were obviously miners. The fifth might have been anything. He was carefully dressed. He looked like money, and he had the self assured air of a man who has seen many places and many things, none of them forgotten.

Morehouse waited a moment longer. If someone met the traveler, if someone knew him, this would not work. Excited, he watched the man climb down. He watched the driver throw the luggage out of the boot. The newcomer picked up his own and started alone toward the Union Exchange. Then Morehouse went after him, shoving the crowd aside and halting the man.

"Here I am," Morehouse said, loudly. "How are you? I'd begun to think you'd never get here."

The stranger stopped, a faint, inquiring smile lifted one corner of his lips. He said, "Yes?" and waited and Morehouse was pleased that the young man was reckless enough to let him go on with his obvious mistake until the time came for him to use it as an advantage or to laugh about it.

"This way," said Morehouse, and took the bags from the other's hands. "You're headed for the wrong hotel. That's Matt Roberts' house." Saying no more he turned directly across the Square, making the stranger follow him and moving so fast they were out of the crowd before the traveler could protest.

Not until they reached the water company office and Morehouse had set down the luggage, did the newcomer have a chance to ask, "What's this all about, if you don't mind?"

"I don't mind at all," said Morehouse. "Do you know anyone around here?"

"Not a soul," said the man. "And least of all you, my friend."

"You will," said Morehouse. "My name is Spencer Morehouse and I'm looking for a man to help me play a joke on this town."

The stranger laughed. "Richard P. Telfair at your service." He bowed a little. "Traveling in boots and ladies shoes for Hamm's of Cincinnati. One of the oldest houses in the business." He looked at Spencer's polished boots and smiled. "But I see you know my line. Now suppose you tell me yours."

Morehouse handed him a cigar and eased him into the desk chair. "All I ask, Telfair, is ten minutes of your time. I'm going to tell you an amusing story." He went right ahead, telling Telfair

about the water company, without mentioning the original swindle and leaving out Gale's trouble with Roberts.

"So you see," he added, "I promised these miners a banker. There isn't any banker, of course. All I want to do is to stir them into investing in their own company. If they think you represent the House of Rothschild, they'll come rushing in to buy stock. I'll pay you well for posing as a banker for a few days. But I'll never be able to pay you as much as the satisfaction you'll get from the knowledge that you, and you alone, helped these poor struggling men to help themselves." He took a handkerchief from his pocket and dabbed gently at his eyes.

Telfair grinned. "You move me deeply, Mr. Morehouse, and I haven't had any fun since I hit this country. But one thing. If I go into this I expect to be treated with the courtesy and dignity becoming the representative of a great banking establishment."

"Anything you want," said Morehouse, agreeably. "I'll arrange for a room for you at the Holbrook House and pay all expenses. You do your own talking, but just remember two things. You don't like Matt Roberts and his methods or his bank. And you are interested in a second water ditch."

PRUDENCE GALE walked into the water company office, followed by Ben Derksen. Seeing a stranger seated at the desk, she stopped. "I'm sorry," she said to Spencer Morehouse. "I didn't know you were busy."

"Come in. Come in, my dear," said Morehouse. "This is the big day. May I introduce Mr. Richard P. Telfair, the Carolina representative of the House of Rothschild. Mr. Telfair, Prudence Gale."

Telfair rose, bowing. "This," he said, "is an unexpected pleasure."

"It's a pleasure for me," said Prudence, warmly. "I'll have to tell my father you're here, Mr. Telfair. You must come to supper tonight. You bring him, Spencer."

"Sure," said Morehouse. He beamed at Telfair with all the creative pride of an artist looking at a portrait he had long imagined. But Telfair was paying no attention to him.

"We'll be there, madam," said Telfair. "We'll be there."

"Thank you," said Prudence. "And now if you'll excuse me, I'll go and find my father."

When she was gone, Telfair drew a long breath. "Spencer, my boy, you couldn't drive me out of town with wild horses. I'm here to stay. I've been looking for a girl like her, all my life. Who is she?"

Ben Derksen shifted his feet. "Why I guess you better be careful about saying that around, Mr. Telfair," he said. "I guess Mr. Gale wouldn't like you to talk that way about his wife."

"His wife?" said Telfair. "Don't say that. You mean she's married?"

"Why you bet she's maried," said Ben. "And the man she married licked Chauncey Burns. He's a big tough redhead and I'd hate to have him mad at me."

Telfair, disappointed, looked from Derksen to Morehouse. "On second thought," he said, "maybe I won't stay. Maybe you better find another man, Mr. Morehouse."

"Look," said Morehouse, quickly. "Don't take Ben seriously. Sure she's married, but it doesn't mean anything. Gale's not in love with her. He only married her because Matt Roberts wanted her. You think if Gale liked her he'd be spending his honeymoon alone in the hills? And she'll find it out one of these days. When she does, you ought to be here."

"Why, Spence," said Ben Derksen, shocked, "you're a liar." With one hand he caught Morehouse by the back of his coat collar and lifted him to tiptoe. "I guess I ought to break your neck. Mr. Gale wouldn't do a thing like that." He shook Morehouse until the small man's teeth rattled. "Take it back, Spence. Take it back now."

Morehouse was scared. He had always been afraid of Derksen's strength at close quarters. "All right, Ben," he said. "I'll take it back. I'm sorry I mentioned it."

Derksen gave him one final shake and let him go. "Why I guess you should be. I guess a man shouldn't go around talking that way."

Morehouse stepped quickly back and put his hand in his coat pocket. Rage and fear darkened his face. "Ben," he said, quietly, "don't ever lay your hands on me again. And now I'm going to take back what I just took back to get away

from you. I'm right about Gale, you understand. Now forget it and get the hell out of here."

Derksen moved his head slowly from side to side. His big hands worked. "Why I don't know what's the matter with you, Spencer," he said. "But you're still lying. I'll catch you without that gun someday and make you take it back again." He turned then and shambled out of the office, a fat man in baggy clothes, suddenly tired and disillusioned.

SLOWLY he moved down Silver, not conscious of the people he brushed out of his way, and turning onto Adams, followed it to Kellogg's house. On the porch he knew a moment's hesitation, then he knocked and waited unhappily until Prudence opened the door for him.

"Why Ben," she said, startled by his face. "What's happened?"

Ben removed his round shapeless hat and twisted it slowly it his big hands. "Miss Prudence, how much does Spencer Morehouse mean to your water company? Could you build it without him?"

Quick alarm came up into the girl's eyes. "Ben! What's happened to Spencer?"

"Why nothing, yet," said Ben. "But can you get along without him."

"Yes," she said, uncertainly, "I guess we could."

Derksen showed relief. "Why that's fine," he said. "Then I can go ahead and kill him."

"Ben!" cried Prudence. "Have you lost your mind? What's he done?"

"Why he's just been talking around," Derksen said.

"Talking around? What did he say?"

"Well, I don't like to tell you."

"You'll tell me," she said. "What is he saying?"

"Well, he told a man that Mr. Gale don't love you. He said Mr. Gale just married you to get even with Matt Roberts. He said . . ." The words died in Derksen's throat. The girl had started to laugh. "He said . . ." Derksen went on, doggedly, "that that's the reason Mr. Gale's gone out in the hills."

Prudence stopped laughing. She put out a hand and laid it on Ben's arm. And in the long time they stood there, Ben felt her weight lean more and more against him until he knew she had no strength of her own, remaining. Hurt grew in her eyes until he wanted to turn and run from the sight of it. He had made a mistake. Morehouse had been right.

"Why it looks to me," he said, the words dragging out of him, "like I was fixing to kill the wrong man."

Prudence pulled back from him. "Well don't ever kill Spencer Morehouse for what he said," she flared.

"Why I guess not," said Ben. "I guess I'll kill Gale."

The hurt look faded from her eyes. And what came to take its place, Ben had never seen before. It was anger without heat and more terrible because of it. Her eyes became bright and shiny, without depth or room for deep feeling.

"No, Ben," she said. "I want you to help Mr. Gale. I want this water ditch built, no matter what happens. That's for my father. As for Mr. Gale, I'll take care of him myself. And please, Ben, don't ever mention this to anyone, not even Mr. Gale. Promise me?"

"Why I promise," said Ben, and had difficulty in speaking. "But if the time ever comes, Miss Prudence . . ."

"Yes, Ben. If the time ever comes, I'll tell you."

She watched him trudge away and when he had finally disappeared, she followed him along Adams, continuing on past the Square to enter Matt Roberts' Bank.

Allison was at the high counting table, Roberts at the desk in the corner. He turned, and seeing Prudence, showed surprise.

"Come in, Prudence," he said. "Come in."

"Can I see you alone?" she asked.

"Take half an hour," said Roberts, without looking at Allison.

Geoffry Allison rose, removed his satin wristlets deliberately, then slowly put on his broadcloth coat. He was a man who never appeared on the street in his shirt sleeves. Without a glance toward the girl, he picked up his beaver hat and stepped out into the last rays of the afternoon sun.

"Well?" said Roberts.

"I want some truths, Matt," Prudence said. "You knew Ward Gale before you came here, didn't you?"

He searched her face carefully, making his decision. "We knew each other. Yes. I suppose I should have told you

before, but hated to admit the mistake of having known such a man."

She sighed a little, knowing that once started on the truth he would probably keep on. It made it harder for her to ask her next question. "Are you married, Matt? Do you have a wife and two children in Boston?"

"Me?" said Roberts. His laugh was so instantaneous, she knew what the right answer was before he even said, "Where in the world did you get that idea? Oh . . ." His face hardened. "Ward Gale told you."

"Yes," she said. "Ward Gale told me."

"He lied," said Roberts.

"I know he did," said Prudence. "Can you tell me any more about him?"

"Plenty," said Roberts, thinking of Charley's mission in the hills. "It's too bad you waited until he ran out on you."

Prudence stiffened a little. "What makes you think he ran away?"

"I know it," said Roberts. "I know he'll never come back. It's too bad you never asked me about him before this, Prudence."

THE next morning, Spencer Morehouse lay abed late, thinking about the preceding evening. Never since first meeting her, had he known Prudence to be as entertaining, as vivacious as she had been last night at supper. Spurred by her charm, Richard Telfair had thoroughly convinced Wilson Kellogg that he was Rothchild's representative. The man had talked glowingly of Eastern cities and European capitals and Morehouse chuckled at the memory. Telfair was a convincing liar and it was obvious he would do anything to build himself up in the eyes of Wilson Kellogg's daughter.

Spencer rose finally, taking his usual care with his toilet and then walked down the hall to Telfair's room. It was empty. Concerned, Morehouse went on downstairs and out to the street.

The first thing that caught his eye was a huge sign, the paint still wet, over the doorway of the water company office.

ROTHSCHILD AND COMPANY—BANKERS AND DEALERS IN INTERNATIONAL EXCHANGE. CORRESPONDENTS IN NEW YORK, PHILADELPHIA AND ABROAD. RICHARD P. TELFAIR, LOCAL MANAGER AND PARTNER.

For an instant, Morehouse refused to believe his eyes. Then anger flared up in him. This shoe salesman certainly had his nerve. This could easily wreck all their hopes of selling stock. Morehouse felt in his pocket, then he moved quickly to the office entrance and pushed in.

Telfair sat at a desk in the corner. Behind him, against the wall, stood an empty packing case. He looked up and smiled, engagingly.

Morehouse did not speak until he had reached the desk. Staring down at Telfair, he said, "Aren't you reaching out a little far to impress that girl? Who told you that you were a banker? What do you think will happen when the people learn you're nothing but a shoe salesman? I don't like people who do things without consulting me."

"That's too bad," said Telfair, unconcerned.

"For you it is," said Morehouse. "All I have to do is to step onto the street and tell the first man who comes along that this is a hoax."

Telfair chuckled. "But you can't do that, Spencer. You've already told everyone I represent the Rothschilds. You'd have some difficulty in explaining your part in this business. Why not relax and play along with me? Nothing's changed. Think of the possibilities."

Spencer's quick mind was already weighing those possibilities. And the more he thought of them the more he was inclined to agree with Telfair. He wondered why it had not occurred to him before to start a bank. A bank was even better than a water company. The miners would bring in their deposits. When the deposits became big enough, he and Telfair would merely disappear. And Telfair would be blamed. Yes, the bank was a good idea. And the name Rothschild would build men's confidence. He began to remove his coat.

"What are we going to do for a safe?"

Telfair indicated the empty packing case. "That will do for now. We'll get someone to guard it, of course. What about Derksen? Is he honest?"

"As the day is long," said Morehouse.

Telfair said, musingly, "And I noticed yesterday that he didn't like you too well. Yes, I think Ben Derksen will be a very good guard."

Morehouse chuckled. "Don't try and

insult me, Richard. Once you put Derksen to guarding the money, he won't let you have it either. If may be a little inconvenient to reason with Ben when the time comes for us to run out."

"Run out?" Telfair looked surprised, then he smiled a bit sadly. "Spencer, you have me all wrong. I'm not running out. Al' my life I've wanted to settle down and be somebody. Now I have the chance. I'm head of a bank. You'll never get me out of here."

Morehouse narrowed his black eyes. Carefully, he said, "Sure I was just sounding you out, Telfair. I thought for a minute you had cooked up some swindle. I wouldn't stand for that."

"It's a funny thing," said Telfair. "I was thinking the same thing about you. I wouldn't stand for that either. It's good we understand each other."

"It's always a good thing to know what's on the other fellow's mind," murmured Morehouse and walked outside to stare up at the green hills. He wondered where Gale was. He wondered how soon Gale would be back. He wondered what Gale would say when he found out about the bank. Things were getting out of control.

GALE was thirsty. His shoulder bled a little where a bullet had burned his flesh. The sun was still three hours high and there was no hope in him that darkness would come in time.

The last shot had been fired from the north ridge and now Gale lay on that side of the animal, having faked a movement to circle around. He hugged the ground tight and waited, every muscle tense against the shock of a bullet.

Minutes passed. There was no sound. Finally he heard it. A twig snapped on his exposed side. He rolled, coming up to one knee, his rifle swinging. The boy hunter stood not ten yards from him.

"Hey!" the boy yelled, surprised. "Was it you Charley Royer was shooting at? I saw him and when I yelled, he run down and got on his horse."

Gale glanced around at the circling ridge. He drew a long breath and got slowly to his feet, half expecting another shot. None came. It was peaceful. Birds called again from the tree tops. Beads of perspiration popped out on his forehead and he drew a sleeve across his face, relieved.

"Thanks," he said to the boy. "Thanks for coming down. Charley Royer, did you say?"

"Why sure," said the boy. "I saw him plain as day. He's no good, Charley ain't. He's a Concho man."

"Did he see you?" said Gale.

"No sir," said the boy. "I never let Charley see me. I must have scared him when I yelled, him not knowing who I was."

"That's good," said Gale. "And don't worry about him. If he did see you, he won't ever bother you. What's the shortest way to town?"

"I'll show you, mister. I know a short cut."

Gale stripped the saddle from the dead animal and tossed it under the clump of brush. He made a bundle of the maps and notes and field book and stuffed them into his coat. Then catching up his rifle he swung out after the boy. The sun was just going down when they came over the brow of Yankee Hill and dropped down the side gulches into Carolina.

It was dark when Gale parted company with the boy at Adams and Silver and moved on down toward Kellogg's house. A lamp burned in the parlor window, throwing its yellow radiance in a path across the porch. He wanted to call out to Prudence, but he held it back. He wanted his hands on her, he wanted her eager kisses when he told her what he had found out on this trip. Even Charley Royer could wait until after that.

Quietly, he pushed open the front door. Sounds reached him from the rear. He edged down the hall, pausing in the kitchen entrance. Prudence was at the stove, her back to him. He took two quick steps and grasped her shoulders. She stiffened.

"It's me," Gale said.

"Oh," she said, and relaxed against him. "Matt! You startled me."

For an instant, Gale stood still, unconscious that his fingers bit into the soft flesh of her shoulders. Then he let his hands fall and she turned to face him.

"Ward!" she said. "So it's you. I didn't think you'd have the nerve to come back." Her voice was level, unflurried. As if uninterested, she turned back to the stove.

Gale caught her arm and turned her

back. "Wait a minute. You said Matt. Did you mean Roberts?"

"Why yes. He's coming to supper. Do you have any objections?"

"You know how I feel about Roberts."

"I know how you lied about him."

"What do you mean?"

"You lied when you told me Roberts was married."

"Who said I lied?"

"Didn't you?"

"All right, I lied. But I had a reason to lie."

"I'm sure you did," said Prudence, her voice dangerously sweet. "I'm sure you have a reason for everything you say and do. You married me to hurt Matt Roberts. It never occurred to you that it might hurt me. You didn't even care, did you? You . . ."

"I cared," he said. "I cared then and I care now." He gripped her shoulders again, looking at her hungrily. "Can't you tell, Prudence?"

"I can tell," she said, "that your pride's hurt because I'm entertaining Matt Roberts. Just let me tell you something, Mr. Gale. I'm going to entertain Mr. Roberts or anyone else I choose."

Gale said, bitterly, "Then I best get out."

"No," she told him. "This is a small town. You're my husband. Do you think I'm going to endure the scandal of you walking off and leaving me? Not for a minute. This is what you're going to do. I'll entertain who I please and you'll like it. You'll live here on these premises. You'll see me morning and night until you get sick and tired of looking at me, but you'll never touch me. Do you understand that?"

"If I didn't love you," said Gale, "that would be an easy thing for me to do. But I do love you, so I can't stay, Prudence. I'm sorry."

She gave him a bright, hard smile. "You'll stay. If I told the miners what you've done to me, they'd hang you to the oak in the Square. You'll stay, Ward. You'll stay until I tell you to get out."

A knock at the front door cut her off. She brushed past Gale and went down the hall. He heard her greet Roberts. Then he turned blindly, and crossing the kitchen, stepped out into the night.

He stood there a moment in the dark. Never had he wanted to kill Matt Roberts more than he wanted to now. But Prudence had tied his hands. No matter what his original motive had been, if he killed Roberts now, it would seem to Carolina that he had only struck at the man because of his own wife's unfaithfulness. The only thing he could do now was to push Roberts until the man broke and came for him first.

VIII

GALE was certain Roberts had sent Charley Royer into the hills. Moving quickly along Silver, determined to find the man, he saw the lights in the water company's office reflecting on the new sign and broke his stride to read it. Muttering he swerved and turned in, not believing what he had read.

Spencer Morehouse was at the big desk, talking to a stranger. Ben Derksen sat on the end of a packing case, fat and immobile, a shotgun with sawed barrels resting across his thick knees.

Morehouse said, "Ward! What the devil's happened?"

"You know a man named Charley Royer?" asked Gale.

"No," said Morehouse. "Who's he?"

"I know Charley," said Derksen. "What about him?"

"He pinned me down in a clearing," said Gale. "He killed my horse and took a dozen shots at me. Where does he hang out, Ben?"

Derksen took time to answer. "Darlington's, maybe. He's close with the head bartender."

"Good enough," said Gale, and looked at the stranger.

Morehouse saw the look and smiled a little to himself. "This is Richard Telfair, Ward. Mr. Telfair, Mr. Gale. Mr. Telfair is with the Rothschilds. He's opening a bank here."

"Has it helped you sell any stock?" said Gale.

"Why no," said Morehouse. "The bank opening has given the miners the idea that the Rothschilds will build the ditch."

"I told you so," said Gale, "after your speech. You're a fool, Spence. Which one of you two thought this one up?"

Morehouse bridled. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Yes you do," Gale said. "I don't know where you found this man, but I'll bet anything you want to name, that

he has no more to do with the Rothschilds than I do. What's the idea? You figuring on collecting deposits and then running out with them."

Telfair reddened. "Now just a minute, Mr. Gale. It doesn't matter who I was. I know something about handling credit. I've always wanted to do something like this and I intend to run this bank honestly. Why else do you think I hired Derksen to guard the money?"

"Money," said Gale. "How much have you taken in?"

"Almost a hundred thousand," said Telfair. "You'd be surprised how few men trust Mr. Roberts. They've been transferring their deposits for the last five days."

Gale could not believe it. He walked over and peered into the packing case. It was half filled with stacked leather and canvas pouches. "A hundred thousand dollars!"

"A nice round sum," said Morehouse, almost smacking his lips.

Gale turned on him sharply. "But what good is it?"

"At least," said Morehouse, "we have taken it away from Roberts. He's not pleased about it. The name Rothschild has worked a regular charm in this camp."

Gale had recovered from his first surprise. "So you're in the banking business," he said, thoughtfully. "You have a hundred thousand dollars. I'm in the water business. I need a hundred thousand dollars. You loan it to me and we'll all be a going concern. I'll give you stock in the water company as collateral."

"Now wait a minute, Ward," protested Morehouse. "Let's think this over. Let's not do anything we might regret."

"I'm not talking to you," said Gale. "You're not in the banking business. The House of Rothschild wouldn't let you in one of their banks unless they tied your hands. I'm speaking to Telfair. What do you say, Mr. Banker?"

"I say no," said Telfair, instantly. "From what you've told us, you're not a good risk, Mr. Gale. And the way Morehouse tells it, stock in the water company is no better than you. Collateral, shot full of holes, has very little value. This bank will loan you no money."

Gale's mouth tightened. "You know, Telfair, what would happen if I exposed you?"

"Yes I do," said Telfair. "They'd run the bank and close me out in a few hours."

"That's right," said Gale.

"But that would ruin you, too," Telfair pointed out. "Morehouse set me up in this town as a member of the House of Rothschild. Everyone knows you're associated with Mr. Morehouse."

Morehouse laughed. "Ward," he said, "you get the funniest look on your face when you get stuck." He turned his amusement on Telfair. "But you better watch him, Dick. He got the same look on his face when I thought I had him in a corner in Stockton. He turned the tables on me. He's liable to do the same on you."

"There's nothing he can do," said Telfair, sure of himself, "without ruining his own game."

"Why don't be so sure about that," said Ben Derksen, shifting the shotgun on his knees.

Gale looked at the fat man. "Ben," he said, "I'm going to find Charley Royer. You want to come with me and watch my back?"

Derksen returned his stare. "Has finding Charley got anything to do with building a water ditch?"

Gale shook his head. "No, Ben. It's personal. Does that make any difference?"

Derksen spat into the corner. "I work here at night," he said. "I guess I could get off if it had something to do with the water ditch. But I guess I can't get off if it's personal. That's what I promised Mrs. Gale. She made me promise I'd help you build the water ditch. I'll do anything she says."

"Thanks, Ben," said Gale, Derksen's attitude puzzling him. "You doing what my wife wants you to do, I'll take as a personal favor to me. Now I'll find Royer myself."

He turned away, not seeing the grief in Derksen's childlike eyes. Ignoring Telfair and brushing Morehouse aside, he left the bank.

DARLINGTON'S was full. The crowd, in town for the evening's fights, were warming up before the contests would begin.

Gale pushed through the door and shouldered his way to the end of the

bar where Darlington stood in his accustomed place, Cherry behind him.

Darlington said, "Good evening, Mr. Gale."

"Which is your head bartender?" said Gale.

"Why?"

"I'm looking for a man named Royer. Charley Royer. know him?"

Darlington had been smoking. He removed his cheroot and stared thoughtfully at its glowing tip. "Seems like I've heard the name."

Behind him, Cherry drew a sharp, quick breath. She said to Gale, "What do you want with Royer?"

"He's interested in me," said Gale. "He took the trouble to shoot at me in the hills this afternoon. I want to know why."

Cherry looked at her brother, but Phil's full interest remained on his cigar. Her voice was bitter as she said, "No one can be trusted any more." Then she stepped around to face Gale.

"You'll find Royer at the fights. He's serving as one of Yankee Sullivan's seconds. But be careful of him, Ward. Watch him."

"I'll watch him," said Gale. He looked at her, curiously, then left the place.

Darlington started to move after him and Cherry stopped her brother with a word. "Phil!"

"What?" he said, pausing, but not looking back.

"Come here a minute, Phil. I want to talk to you."

"There's nothing to talk about," he said.

"Turn around, Phil," she said. "There's a lot to talk about."

He turned, unwillingly.

"You lied to me, Phil. It isn't so much that you sent Royer after Gale. It's that you sent him after you promised me you wouldn't. You're always talking about degrading me because you run this place. You're always talking about the slights I receive from the women on the other side of Washington. I don't mind those. I didn't mind anything, as long as I could trust you. But now that I can't, I have nothing left."

"Cherry," he said, and there was deep feeling in his voice. "Cherry, darling. The man's married."

"I'm twenty-three years old, Phil. There are certain things I have to decide for my self."

"No," he said. "I'm your brother. I'll decide."

She slapped him then, hard and sharp and final. While he stood there in the suddenly still saloon, she told him in a low, tense voice, "We're on one side or the other, Phil. I'm on Ward Gale's side. Make up your mind." Turning then she moved into the gambling room and climbed the stairs to their quarters above. When she was gone, Darlington moved toward the front door. Pushing the batwings aside he came face to face with Gale.

"Mr. Gale," he said startled, and sought the proper words, not finding them. "My sister is a wonderful woman, as good as they come."

"She is," said Gale, and studied Darlington carefully. "It's too bad. Thank her for me and don't follow me any further." He moved on down Washington then, certain the gambler would not trail him.

The arena lay in a natural fold in the hills, its steeply rising sides making a small amphitheater. In the center was the squared ring and to the side the bear and bull pit. Already the crowd was gathering. Men sat in rising tiers about the central place. The sputtering knot torches and the burning tar barrels gave a reddish, smokish flare which threw their faces into unnatural relief.

Gale pressed through the crowd, pausing behind the group around Yankee Sullivan, and said to a miner on his right, "Which is Charley Royer?"

The miner pointed to a heavy set, paunchy man and Gale pushed on toward him. Behind him the miner called out, trying to be of help, "Hey, Charley. Fellow wants to see you."

ROYER turned. Across the heads of the packed crowd he saw Gale. For an instant he hesitated and Gale thought the man was reaching for a gun. Then Royer whirled and ran, diving through the crowd. Gale rushed him.

They panted up the hill, a dozen yards apart, Royer heading for the close-packed buildings of the Concho. Royer ducked into the first narrow alley. Gale came up to the dark slot and plunged in. In full flight, he hit Royer's out-thrust boot before he saw the man. He went down, skidding on his face.

Royer was over him like a cat, driving his heavy boot into the side of Gale's head. A thousand light splinters exploded in the air but Gale dragged himself upward despite the blinding pain, trying to see Royer and expecting another blow.

But Royer was running again, not having the nerve to stay at close quarters; Charley was the type who liked to play it safe. He knew the Concho well and he counted on his knowledge of the twisting alleyways to escape. He had a hundred-yard start by the time Gale had gained his feet and started out again.

The alleys were unpaved, rutted from the recent rains, still muddy in spots. The only light came from a thin rind of moon hanging in the dark sky. Shadowy figures lurked in the doorways. Spanish voices called as he raced past. At one intersection he ran squarely into a Chinaman and felt the man's coiled queue break loose and whip across his face. But always, somehow, he managed to keep Royer's fleeing figure in sight.

Gale's breath was growing short now and that kick in the head had done him no good, but Royer, too, was already faltering, worn down by the dogged pursuit. But as physical weariness overcame them and the pace slowed, Gale became conscious that he was now the middle man in this chase. Someone followed fast, but there was no time to look around without risking losing sight of Charley Royer.

Royer came to the far edge of the Concho and hesitated for an instant, then swung into the alley which led down past Darlington's. Gale reached the corner in time to see Royer dart through the saloon's side door and thinking the man meant to come out the front onto Washington, he increased his speed and sprinted around the corner, hoping to head him off.

Coming up to the front entrance he slowed to a walk and peered in above the batwing doors. The saloon was almost deserted, the crowd having departed for the fights. Only one bartender worked. A few customers loitered at the gaming tables. Darlington, his back to Gale, moved slowly toward the rear of the bar. Royer advanced toward him and behind the man came Cherry, her fists clenched.

Royer said, panting, "You got to help me, Phil. He's on my heels. He'll kill me."

"Who?" said Darlington. "And what have I got to do with it?"

"You sent me," said Royer, desperately. "You hired me."

"You're crazy," said Darlington. "I don't even know what you're talking about. Get out of here."

"Wait," said Cherry. "I want to talk with him, Phil."

Gale pushed in the front door. Royer saw him and yelled and bolted for the side door. "Jerry!" he shouted. "Frank! Help me."

Two players turned from a table, kicking back their chairs. Gale sprinted past them. He caught Royer at the doorway, his rush driving them out into the dark alley, his arms around the man's shoulders.

They went down together, rolling across the rutted mud to come up with a crash against the opposite building wall. Gale's big hands found Royer's throat and he tried to get to his knees. Two heavy bodies hit him then, flattening him across Royer and he knew the gamblers had joined the fight.

He tried to roll free, but these newcomers were fresh. A boot drove into his ribs. A pair of hands came over his shoulders to find his throat. He was hauled back from Royer and a fist drove hard into his face. He felt the strength run out of him.

Dimly he heard a crash and a yell. The crash came again and the hands were gone from his throat. Freed, he sensed Royer trying to crawl away and dropped on him. Derksen's voice was at his ear.

"Larkin's coming, Mr. Gale. "You'll be all right now."

LARKIN, the marshal, was young, but already white of hair. A coldly efficient man, he stayed behind Royer, prodding him with his gun while he talked to Gale.

"You got any witnesses, Mr. Gale? I can't just take your word he tried to kill you."

"I have a witness," said Gale. "I'll tell you who he is in the morning. Just lock Royer up tonight."

"I can't do that," said Larkin.

"Yes you can," said Cherry. She stood in the doorway across the alley

from where she had witnessed the fight. "Go ahead, Les. Lock him up. You can take my word for it."

Larkin hesitated, looking over Cherry's shoulder at Darlington. In this town there was a balance of power. Roberts directed things west of Washington, Darlington ruled the Concho. "How about it, Phil?"

Darlington's voice was sharper than Gale had ever heard it. "Don't ever doubt my sister's word, Les. Lock him up."

"All right," said Larkin, not pleased by the way Darlington had spoken. "Come on, Charley." He pushed his prisoner ahead of him across Washington.

Cherry spoke to Gale. "You going home now, Ward?"

"No," said Gale.

"You better come in then," she said. "You're a little battered. I'll fix you up."

"Cherry!" said Darlington.

"Come on, Ward," urged Cherry. "Please."

Gale moved slowly toward the door. Cherry reached out and took his hand and Darlington stepped reluctantly aside to let them pass. He watched them cross the gambling room and mount the stairs.

In the living room above, Cherry gave Gale a drink, then brought a basin of warm water.

"You're not very smart," she told Gale. "A smart man wouldn't follow Charley Royer through the Concho."

"I got him," said Gale.

"They almost got you. They would have if it hadn't been for Ben Derksen. It's nice to have friends like that, Ward. Friends that want to help you."

Gale looked at her thoughtfully, realizing how beautiful she was. There was none of the hardness about her a man might expect to see. This, he thought, was to Darlington's credit. Then remembering how Prudence had turned on him, how cool Ben Derksen had been and how Spencer Morehouse had seemed to favor Telfair, he grew a little bitter.

"You're wrong, Cherry. I haven't any friends."

"You're wrong, Ward. Even if the others all turn against you, you can always count on me. If Ben had not come along tonight, I would have gone out there and helped you fight."

"You?" said Gale. "Why? What have I ever done for you?"

She was frank about it. "I like you. Maybe I love you. I don't know."

"Wait a minute, Cherry," he said. "I'm married."

She shook her head. "Don't tell me that, Ward. If you were married, you wouldn't be here. You would have gone home. When a man's hurt, he always goes to the woman he loves."

"No," said Gale. "When a man's hurt, he always goes to a woman who loves him."

SHE looked at him for a long time without comprehension, then gradually her expression altered. "Ward," she said. "Are you trying to tell me that you love your wife, but that she doesn't love you?"

"That's it," he admitted. "You see, Cherry . . ."

"The fool!" Cherry clenched her fists. "What's the matter with her? What does the little redheaded snip want?"

"Wait a minute," said Gale. "Whatever fault there is, is mine, not hers. Let's not talk about it."

She flared. "I suppose I'm not good enough to talk about your precious wife?"

"Cherry," said Gale gently. "You're good enough to talk about anyone."

"Then let me talk," said Cherry, calmed by his quiet tone. "If she doesn't love you, let her alone. A man needs a woman to love him. He needs a woman to fight for him and fix him up when he's hurt. You're going to get hurt again, Ward. I know what goes on in this camp. I'll fight for you, Ward. And I'll make you forget her, too."

Gale stood up. He put his hands on her shoulders and when she would have pushed closer to him, he held her off. "Thanks, Cherry," he said. "But I'm not coming back. You're too nice a person to be mixed up with me. All I could bring you is grief. That's the mistake I made with Prudence."

"I don't care about your mistakes," she said. "Let me decide that."

"No, Cherry. I'll do the deciding."

She shook her head, her anger returning. "Not this time you won't, Ward. This time I'm calling the tune. You'll come back. You'll be nice to me."

Gale looked at her curiously. "What makes you so sure?"

"Your banker," she said. "Your precious Mr. Telfair."

"Telfair? What about him?"

"He's no more a banker than I am, and you know it. I saw him in San Francisco last year. He's a shoe salesman. But so far, Ward," she ran her palms along his cheeks, caressingly, "I've kept that to myself."

LEAVING Darlington's, Gale crossed Washington and walked slowly past the Holbroook House, then the jail and on to the water company office. As he passed the jail, he saw Larkin seated with his feet on the old desk, his hat drawn well down over his eyes, apparently asleep.

In the building next door, a single light burned. Ben Derksen sat at the desk, the shot gun lying beside his arm, the sawed off barrels pointed directly at the doorway. He caught up the gun and raised it automatically as Gale came in.

"Why you should sing out before you walk up on a man," Ben said.

Gale smiled faintly. "Not much danger of anyone walking up on you, Ben. I want to thank you for what you did in the alley. What changed your mind?"

Derksen looked down at his bulging stomach. "Why I guess I got to figuring. If they'd have done for you, you couldn't have built the water ditch for her."

"Was that the only reason, Ben?"

Derksen shifted, uncomfortably. "Mr. Gale, I just don't understand. It's seldom I like a man right off. But that day in Stockton, when you licked Chauncey Burns, I liked you right off. And then for you to do a thing like that."

"Like what, Ben?"

"Like marrying a decent girl, just to get even with Roberts. That's a low thing to do. If you'd only loved her."

"Ben," said Gale, startled, "what do you know about that? What makes you think I don't love her?"

"Why I guess if you loved her, she'd know it, wouldn't she?"

Gale shook his head. "Sometimes, when you get hurt, you can't see things. But I do love her. I know now, I've loved her all the time. I don't know what happened. When I came back from the hills, she had changed. Someone must have told her something. I don't think Roberts could have convinced her. Maybe it was Morehouse. You can't tell what Spencer will do, or why."

"It wasn't Spencer told her," said Ben.

"It doesn't make any difference now," said Gale, wearily. "The damage is done. She's been hurt. All I can do now is build her the water ditch. When that's done, I'll find the man who told her."

"I guess you will," said Ben. "And I guess maybe you'll make him pay for it."

"Yes," said Gale. "But right now we have a ditch to build. I'll need the money, Ben."

"What money?"

"The money in the box. I'm going to borrow it for the water company. You're not going to try and stop me, are you?"

Derksen thought this over. "Why Mr. Gale," he said, "when you were in here earlier, you said Mr. Telfair wasn't a banker. Is that right?"

"That's right," said Gale.

Ben scratched his head. "It beats all. I don't know whether I'm coming or going. Time was, when a man said something, you could believe it. Now . . ." He stared helpless at Gale, his simple, direct mind confused by the devious forces pressing upon him.

"Listen, Ben," said Gale. "Can you believe this? I'm not stealing this money. I'm borrowing it to build the ditch. The water company will give the bank stock to secure the loan. As soon as the ditch is finished, everyone will want to buy stock in it. The bank can then sell the shares they are holding and recover their deposits. Or they can hold them and draw interest on the loan. You understand that?"

"Why I guess that sounds honest enough," said Ben.

Gale said, "It isn't honest, Ben. It would only be honest if the bank, itself, had some capital of its own to make the loan. This bank has no capital. It's deposits we're going to take. But, by completing the ditch, we help the depositors to help themselves."

"You lost me there," said Derksen. "But if you say we should, we'll do it. A man's got to trust somebody. When do you want the money?"

"Now," said Gale. "I'll go down and talk to Emil Aruup. He's the biggest merchant in Carolina. He knows more

about where to lay his hands on supplies than anyone else in the country. If he agrees, we'll carry the money down to his safe. But, Ben, don't mention this loan to anyone, except Morehouse and Telfair. If you do, the whole thing's ruined."

"Me," said Ben, "I guess I've talked too much already. I won't say anything."

ARUUP was smoking his late pipe when Gale came in. Gale said, "I'd like to talk to you. Are you about ready to close up?"

The merchant was a silent man. He made his way across the cluttered floor between the coils of rope and stacked shovels and barred the front door. Then he led Gale to the living quarters in the rear. "What's on your mind?"

Gale said, "We're ready to start building the ditch. We have a hundred thousand dollars, which I want to hand to you tonight. I'll tell you roughly what we need. Enough timber for eight miles of flume. Iron braces to hang it to two miles of canyon wall. Logs for a dam and trestles. Tools to work with. Powder. And enough labor to complete the job."

"Why come to me?" said Aruup.

"Because you know this country. You know where the materials can be found."

Aruup knocked out the heel of his pipe. "You must think I'm a fool, Gale. The minute I started, Roberts would be on my neck from morning until night. And if you failed to complete the ditch, I'd be ruined. And you haven't got a chance in the world. You need any help bringing the money here?"

"No," said Gale, and grasped the man's hand.

He and Derksen made a dozen trips. When the last of the dust had been transfered to Aruup's big safe, the three of them sat down, Aruup with pen and paper before him. Derksen proved surprisingly helpful. Having worked on the Roberts' flume, Ben had retained in his mind every detail of construction.

They would bring in a saw mill first, setting it up above the dam site and cut four-inch puncheons for the walls and flooring of the flume. The iron would have to come from Stanford's store in Sacramento. The tools Aruup would purchase in San Francisco. Between them, Aruup and Derksen named a dozen men who had building experience in the east and who would serve as foremen on various sections of the ditch, for it was no part of their plan to wait until the dam was completed. This had to be done hurriedly if they hoped to fill their basin before the snows melted in the high hills and the rivers ran low.

Morning customers had already banged on Aruup's front door before they finished. The merchant cooked them a late breakfast and, after they finished eating, Gale and Ben stepped out into the street. As they approached the water company office, Morehouse and Telfair came out of the Holbrook House and turned toward them, both these men unconsciously hurrying when they saw Ben.

"What's the idea, Ben?" Telfair said angrily. "Why aren't you in there guarding the money? That's what we hired you for."

"Why," said Derksen, "everything's safe enough. There's no money to guard. Mr. Gale borrowed all of it."

"Borrowed it!" Telfair turned white, then said angrily to Gale, "So help me, you won't get away with this."

"You better keep your voice low, mister," said Gale. "If anyone hears you yelling about loaning all your money, they might want their deposit back. Then where would you be?"

Telfair glanced around and wiped his forehead with the sleeve of his coat. "Let's go into the office and talk this thing over."

"There's nothing to talk about," said Gale. "I'm tired. I've been working all night spending that money. Spencer's the business man of the water company. Get him to make out enough shares of stock to cover the loan. And by the way, we'll need more money from time to time. You better get some more deposits."

"You'll play heck getting it," said Telfair.

"We'll get it," Gale said. "Until that water ditch is finished, your bank is in bad shape, Mr. Rothschild. You better turn all your efforts to helping us. That's your only chance."

"Drat you," said Morehouse. "I've got a good notion to . . ."

"To do what?" said Gale.

In the interval they appraised each

other Morehouse lost his angry look. "That's just it, Ward. What can I do?" He turned to Telfair, letting himself enjoy the other's discomfort. "Just when you think you've got Gale in a corner, he turns the tables on you. The only chance any of us have now, is to finish the ditch. I never thought I'd live to see the day when I would work on something this big for nothing."

"That's all fine," said Telfair. "But what happens? The first customer into the bank is going to see that the packing case is empty."

"No," said Morehouse, dryly. "We can't let that happen. Use your head." He turned to Ben Derksen. "Fill up those empty money sacks with gravel and stack them in the case. It will be your job to see no one gets close enough to that case to find out the difference."

"I don't care what you do," said Gale. "I'm going to bed. I'll use your room, Spence, so I'll be handy. No use of me going all the way home."

Without waiting for an answer he started for the Holbrook House. As he came opposite the jail, the marshal rushed out, almost running into him.

"Blast them," he said, "they can't do that to my jail."

Gale stopped. "Can't do what?"

"They dug a hole through the rear wall."

"Who did?"

"Charley's friends. He's gone." Then really looking at Gale for the first time, he said, "You better watch yourself. Charley was awful mad. He didn't think you played fair with him, having him put in jail that way."

IX

WITH the ditch started, Kellogg was happy. One of his two dreams was coming true under the impetus of the big redhead who had become his son-in-law. His second dream, that of making Carolina the capital of California, was bound to follow. The petitions with their forty thousand names were piled neatly on his library shelves. All that was necessary now was to wait until the fall session of the legislature and present them.

The speed with which the water ditch progressed, surprised even Gale. Emil Aruup, under his quiet, dry exterior had proved to be an intense, driving man. The mountains of material grew The saw mill was already spewing out timbers cut from soft sugar pine. The lower cribbing for the dam was in. Men suspended by swaying ropes drilled holes into the rock face of the canyon wall and fastened the iron brackets into place.

Four crews worked at timbering for the trestles and the building of these went forward under Gale's personal direction. But Aruup's purchases and the steady drain of labor's wages ate huge holes in the store of money and Gale was forced to call on Telfair again and again. Fortunately, the miners' confidence in the Rothschilds' Bank increased and the deposits mounted steadily. But no matter how they grew, Gale syphoned them off as the wearying days turned into weeks, the weeks into months.

When necessity forced him into Carolina, which was often, since he had to keep in constant touch with Aruup, Telfair and Morehouse, Gale stayed at the Kellogg place as Prudence demanded. When her father was present, Prudence was gay and interested, demanding that Gale tell her of the full progress of the work. But when they were alone in the confines of their room, she never spoke to him.

It was a curious arrangement and one Gale could have easily made intolerable for her, but he made no effort to cross the invisible boundary she had drawn, thus making it intolerable for himself.

Occasionally, in the forgetfulness of sleep, her arm came out to circle him and he would lie there in the darkness, miserable and lonely. There was only one thing he had to be thankful for. Since that first night he had come home from the hills, Roberts had never come back to the Kellogg house. Whether that decision had been made by Roberts or Prudence, he had no way of knowing and he would not ask.

Three times Gale had been shot at from the brush. Whether this was Roberts' work or Charley Royer, or Chauncey Burns attempting to settle old scores, Gale did not know. But he did know the planned attacks on the working crews could stem from no other source than Roberts. Men had been waylaid and killed. One trestle had been

fired and destroyed, forcing them to hire guards, which added to the expense and increased their difficulties. And there were open boasts in the saloons along Washington that Roberts would never let them make the crossing of his right-of-way.

Cherry Darlington added to Gale's worries. Three times she had sent messages to him demanding he come to see her. The third had been delivered to the bank and Morehouse looked at him questioningly.

"She's a lot of woman, Ward. Haven't women caused you enough trouble already?"

Gale flared at him. "What do you know about my troubles, Spence?"

"I'm not a fool," said Morehouse. "I'm not deceived by appearances."

"You're a fool if you think I'm interested in Cherry Darlington," said Gale. "I'm only interested in one woman."

Morehouse's eyes were bright and probing. "Then why do you spend so much time at Darlington's? If you don't go there yourself, she sends for you. And you do what she says. And look, Ward. I'm not the only one who's noticing that. Wilson Kellogg's no fool, either. In a town this size, you can't get by with a thing like this."

Gale said, angrily, "I'm not trying to get by with anything, Spence. If you want to know the truth, I go to see Cherry Darlington because I have to. Cherry knows Telfair isn't a banker. One word from her and you'd see a run on the bank. The only reason she hasn't told her brother, so far, is that I go to see her."

"My gosh!" said Morehouse. "Why didn't you tell me this before?"

"Because," said Gale. "If I had, Telfair would have folded up and run out and you would have been useless to me."

"But, Ward. What if she gets serious? We better do something."

"Sure," said Gale. "We better do something. Because when I've got enough money out of this bank to complete the work, I won't go to see her any more. Compared to Prudence, I don't care what happens to Telfair, or you, or me, or Matt Roberts. You're a smart man, Spence. You better figure out a way to get her off my neck."

For a moment Morehouse let his guard fall and Gale saw something he had never seen before. "I'd like to," the small man said. "And Ward, you're not good for Cherry. Maybe that's what I've been worrying about, you going over there so often. Maybe I should do something about it." He rose, straightened his coat and, without another word, left the bank. Through the window, Gale watched him cross to Darlington's.

THE dam was done. Behind the earth-filled walls the lake began to form. The hanging portion of the flume was in place and carefully guarded. The trestles were completed. All that remained now was four miles of gravity flow ditch and the crossing of Matt Roberts' flume.

They held a conference in the bank. Gale, Morehouse, Telfair and Wilson Kellogg. Gale said, "It will only take forty thousand more. That's what Aruup figures. We've got to have the money. Otherwise, everything we've done is lost."

Telfair had been pacing the floor. Derksen sat in his accustomed place on the packing case. The banker swung around, running long fingers nervously through his hair.

"But, Ward, what you ask is impossible. Our withdrawals are almost as big as our new deposits now. This camp is old enough so that many men have made their pile and are heading home. We have thirty-five thousand dollars on hand. Our books show that we have better than two hundred and fifty thousand dollars on deposit. The difference has been loaned to your water company. What would happen if we had a small run? Suppose there was a new strike? Suppose a lot of men wanted to leave fast? What would happen then?"

"Things haven't changed," said Gale. "Let me have thirty thousand."

"No."

"Let me have twenty."

"No."

"My dear sir," said Wilson Kellogg. "Mr. Gale has done everything humanly possible. You have to stand behind him now. Why can't you send word to your principals and explain the situation? Surely they're not going to throw over two hundred thousand dollars for the lack of thirty more."

Gale, Morehouse and Telfair looked

at each other. It was up to Telfair. He stood with his head down for a moment, thinking. When he looked up he spoke to Kellogg, but his sly smile was for Gale.

"All I can do, Mr. Kellogg, is to send a dispatch out on the morning stage. It will take time to receive the answer. Naturally, we will have to hold up the work until it arrives." He brushed his hands. "I guess that settles it, Mr. Gale."

Gale kept his anger to himself and stood up. With Kellogg present there was nothing further he could say. "It's late, Wilson," he said. "Let's go home."

"Yes," said Kellogg. "First thing in the morning I must leave for Sonora to welcome the Governor. He is to be the guest of honor at the *baille*. And gentlemen," he paused and rubbed his palms together, "I shall speak to him about making Carolina the capital. My petitions are all ready."

They walked down Silver in silence. Not until they made the turn onto Adams did Kellogg speak.

"Ward," he said then. "What's the matter?"

"We're licked," said Gale. "If we don't get some more money, I can't pay the crews next week."

"I wasn't thinking about the ditch. I was thinking about you and Prudence and the Darlington woman."

Gale stopped dead, searching for an answer. Kellogg continued. "I have watched Prudence when she thought herself not observed. She's unhappy. I told you that morning, at Simmons' Tent, that if you ever let my daughter down, I'd kill you. You had better watch yourself, Ward." He walked on then and Gale had no choice but to follow.

Coming into the house, Ward found that Prudence had already gone upstairs. He climbed to their room, pushed open the door and found her already in bed, her face turned away from him. He shut the door quietly and moved over to stand beside her.

"Prudence," he said, "we have to have a talk."

She did not move, but he knew she was awake. "You made the rules and they've been hard to keep. But your father spoke to me tonight. This thing has gotten away from us. We can't go on this way. I'm not blaming you. I'm saying only that it isn't fair to drag your father into our misery. I'm going out for a walk now. I want to think things over. While I'm gone, you do the same. There are two choices. Either you can believe me when I tell you that I love you, or we separate. If we do that, as soon as I complete this ditch, I'll leave Carolina."

"Where will you go to do your thinking?" she asked. "Darlington's?"

"I could," he said. "I'm welcome there." With that he left her.

But he did not go to Darlington's. Nor was there anything for him to think about. The decision was up to Prudence.

It was over an hour later when he came out on the ridge above Roberts' flume and stood looking down at the point where the two ditches had to cross. Here a fire burned, sending out its small light against the circle of darkness, showing him the armed guards Roberts had placed there to prevent the crossing.

He wasted ten minutes watching them and planning his campaign, then moved slowly back toward town. Later he passed the Kellogg house. The place was dark. He went on to the Square, surprised at the few lights showing; he had not been conscious of the passing time. Still sleepless, he moved into the Square and, pausing beside the bandstand, he put his back against the rough bark of the Hangman's Oak and lit a cigar.

After two puffs, the tobacco tasted stale and he threw it away, the coal making a shower of sparks as it struck the dry packed earth. Then, still dissatisfied, he crossed Silver and entered the Holbrook House.

There was no one in the lobby. He rounded the high desk and lifted a key from the board. Upstairs, he let himself into an empty room. Without making a light, he sat down on the edge of the bed. Then it was he heard the sharp clout of a single pistol shot.

MATT ROBERTS, with Allison beside him, sat in the darkened express building watching the conference that went on behind the lighted windows of the water company office.

"They're up to something," Roberts said.

Allison's dry voice answered. "There's rumors among the workmen that they're getting short of money. They've

already laid off some of the crews."

"Rothschilds running out of money?" said Roberts.

"We don't know it is the Rothschilds yet, do we?" said Allison. "Unless you've had some word you haven't told me about."

"I've had no answer." Roberts sounded dissatisfied. "But we can't wait any longer. They're ready to make their crossing. All they have to do then is dig a ditch into town. We've got to stop them."

"If it isn't the Rothschilds," said Allison, "where are they getting the money?"

"I don't know," said Roberts. "Unless they're using the deposits of the new bank. As near as I can figure from talking with the men who sold Aruup materials, they must have spent in the neighborhood of two hundred thousand already. It's hard to believe that a new bank would have taken in that much in deposits."

"They've taken most of our business," said Allison, glumly. "I've expected you to do something about it, Matt. When you come right down to cases, this is all Ward Gale's doing. The man's rubbed it into you and you've taken it."

"You've run my business well, Geoffry," said Roberts. "But I'm perfectly capable of running my own personal life. When the right cards turn up, I'll play them, but I have to know what the game is first."

"You'll never know unless one of them talks," said Allison.

Roberts looked speculatively across the Square. The meeting was breaking up. He watched Kellogg and Gale leave together and saw Morehouse and Telfair turn in the opposite direction. The banker swung into the Holbrook House. Morehouse continued on across Washington and disappeared into Darlington's. Both Allison and Roberts noted this and Allison said, in a dissatisfied voice, "Morehouse seems to have found a new interest."

Roberts glanced at him sideways. "First Gale and then Morehouse," he said. "You don't like that, do you Geoffry?"

"She's too good for that place," said Allison. "She's too good." He spoke almost to himself.

Roberts made an impatient gesture and glanced back toward the water company office where Derksen was putting out the window lights. "Ben used to like to drink, didn't he?"

"What's that," said Allison, his mind still across Washington.

"I said Derksen likes to drink. And he's been present at all their conferences. He knows where they got the money. And he's a simple minded fool. Take a bottle over there and see what you can find out."

"I'd rather not," said Allison.

"I don't care what you'd rather not," said Roberts. "I'll be in my rooms when you get through. Get the hog drunk and find out what he knows."

He got up then and moved out onto the street, leaving Allison alone. The banker sat there, resenting Roberts' order. He found it distasteful, and he found it more distasteful that he could not find the courage to disobey. He rose at last and started the precise pattern of his ways. He circled the Square at the corners, pausing only in the saloon next to Darlington's to buy a bottle of whiskey.

Derksen was surprised to see him coming through the door. "Why Mr. Allison," he said.

"I was passing," said Allison. "How are things?"

"Why all right," said Derksen. "They're fine."

"It's a nice night," said Allison. "I couldn't sleep and was taking a walk."

Derksen eyed the bottle the man carried. "Taking that home to a friend, was you?"

"A friend? Oh." Allison laughed in his dry way. "That's a good one, Ben. As a matter of fact, I like to keep a bottle in my room. I was all out. Would you like a drink?"

"Well now," said Derksen, "I don't know as it would be polite to refuse."

He accepted the bottle and started the cork, then opening the drawer of Spencer's desk, produced two glasses, pouring generously He offered one of the tumblers to Allison. "Here's how?" he said, and drained his glass.

Allison had to empty his. He would have liked to wait awhile, but Ben poured again.

"You know, Geoffry," said Ben, "we should be better acquainted. We're both

in the banking business, as the fellow says. Both of us working for somebody else and them making all the money."

Allison's mouth tightened. "That's right, Ben. And what do we get out of it?"

"Callouses," said Ben. "Drink up, Geoffry. It won't be this way all the time. How's your bank doing since mine started up."

ALLISON drank again and felt the whiskey run through him with warming fingers. His resentment against Roberts was a growing thing. He looked across the desk at the slovenly fat man and thought, this is a poor occupation for a gentleman, trying to worm information out of a drunkard. Derksen, unobstrusively, refilled both glasses.

"It must be nice," said Allison, "working for people like the Rothschilds."

"Huh," said Derksen. "What do I get out of it? What do you get out of your bank?"

"My salary," said Allison.

"It ain't enough," said Derksen. "All good bankers should get interest. Hey, you ain't drinking up."

Allison had lost count of his drinks. He emptied the glass. In all of his careful life he had never felt this way before.

"Ben," he said, his voice slightly thickened, "I'm curious. How do the Rothschilds get their money into this bank? It didn't come in by the express."

Derksen shook his head laboriously. "I tell you, Geof, these here Rothschilds have got a lot of banks. They're plumb all over the place. Now if men was to know how they shifted their money here and there, they'd lose a lot of it. So they keep it a secret. I ain't supposed to tell." He filled the glasses again.

Allison steadied himself as he picked up the drink. "Ben," he said, "as one banker to another, that would be a good thing to know. Maybe you and I might have a bank of our own, someday. How do they do it?"

Ben looked cautiously around the gloomy room. Then he filled the glasses again, thrusting one into Allison's hand. He put his big arm around Allison's shoulder and drew him close. "Geof," he whispered, "I don't know. That's the trouble with foreigners. They don't tell a man nothing. All I know is, that when I come at night, there's always a new shipment in. Maybe they make it some place out in the hills."

He sat down heavily and let his head fall slowly down upon his crossed arms. Allison stared blearily at him for a moment, then had some difficulty hitting the front door squarely. Once on the street, he hesitated, finally turning toward Darlington's.

When he had gone, Derksen straightened. An inch of fluid remained in the bottom of the whiskey bottle. He drained it at a gulp, then walking steadily, he went to the door and pitched the empty bottle into the Square. Standing outside, he watched Allison move tipsily into Darlington's.

"Now what the heck," said Ben, "did he want?"

INSIDE the saloon, Allison paused to orient himself, focusing his eyes with some difficulty. The place was only medium filled, but look as he might he could see no sign of Morehouse or Cherry and a cold anger came up to partially clear the fog from his brain.

He saw Darlington at the end of the bar and moved toward him. The gambler said, "Good evening, Mr. Allison," and gave him a studied look. "You're a little late."

"That's my business," said Allison and brushed on past the man, mumbling, "I want to see that no good sister of yours."

"Allison!" said Darlington, sharply, "don't ever . . ."

Allison paid no attention. In the rear gambling room he paused beside a roulette table and looked at the stairway leading to the rooms above. He would have liked to climb them and he wished he were man enough to make the try. But the best he could do was let his imagination run wild. *Cherry and Morehouse. Cherry and Morehouse. Cherry and Morehouse.* It beat a rhythm into his unsteady mind.

"Make your bets, gentlemen," the roulette dealer said.

The words broke through the fever of Allison's thoughts. He turned, staring at the gambling table as if he had never seen it before. That was it. Make a bet. Make a big splash. That's what women liked, a man who made a big splash. A man who took his chances. A

man who won. Why a man could even win this place from Darlington. That would bring her to him.

Although he spent grudgingly, Geoffry always carried considerable money with him. He had a deep fear of poverty and the knowledge that his pockets were well lined, bolstered his ego. But now, he was drunk.

"Five hundred dollars on the red," he said, pulling the money from his pockets.

The wheel turned and the white ball whirred around the upper rim, spun by the dealer's supple fingers. Allison could not follow it. It slowed, finally, dropping down, bouncing twice and settling into Number Sixteen. He had won.

He won again and yet again. The stack of gold before him grew, and this was more intoxicating than the whiskey fumes rising in his brain. Men circled the table, drawn by his large play and for the first time in his life, Allison savored the heady uplift of jovial attention. These men were his friends. They were pulling for him. They wanted him to win. He was winning. He wondered how Darlington felt. He wondered how the dealer felt. That man's face was impassive.

Allison felt himself thinking clearer now. He'd been a fool. It was simple arithmetic that if he had bet twice as much he would have won twice as much. He increased his bets. Sometimes he won and sometimes he lost. It was difficult to keep track. But suddenly the gold which had been piled before him was gone. He had enough left for one more bet.

Sweat broke out across his forehead and he used a white handkerchief to wipe it away. No longer conscious of the crowd pressing about him, he was only aware of the spinning wheel. He made the bet and standing, his hands gripped at his sides, watched the ivory ball. He lost.

Blindly he turned away and ran directly into Darlington. The gambler's mouth was coldly cynical, his eyes hard and filled with deep dislike.

"You're not stopping now, Mr. Allison. Two bets and you'd be as far ahead as you were five minutes ago."

"I'm out of money," Allison muttered.

"You're credit's good," said Phil, and looked over at the dealer. "Let him have twenty thousand, Joe."

Allison turned back uncertainly. He stared at the gold the dealer pushed toward him. Its value had no meaning to him; he had won such large sums there for awhile. He could win again. Why not? He pushed five thousand into the red.

"A bet," said the dealer and spun the wheel. The money lasted four plays.

When the realization of what had happened struck him, Allison was cold sober, shaking. He pushed his way through the crowd, not conscious that Darlington was at his heels, and half blindly felt his way along the bar.

"Wait," said Darlington.

Allison stopped. "What do you want?"

"This wasn't your lucky night," the gambler said. "When can I expect my twenty thousand?"

"Twenty thousand?" said Allison, the sum making sense to him for the first time. "Why I haven't got twenty thousand dollars, Phil. You knew that when you pressed it on me."

Darlington was relentless. "A man doesn't gamble when he can't pay. I want the money by morning or I'll send someone to collect."

Allison was frightened. "Now wait a minute, Phil. You can't do that. After all, we both work for Matt Roberts."

"I work for no one," said Darlington. "Twenty thousand by morning." He stood there and watched Allison leave the room, the banker more unsteady now than when he had come in.

WHEN business was done, Darlington stepped out onto dark Washington Street. He was still angered by Allison's careless reference to Cherry. Baiting Allisor into losing a fortune had not brought him the satisfaction he thought it would and pride called for him to make the man pay.

Seeing the lights still burning in Roberts' Bank, he moved like a shadow along the side street and peered through a crack in the partly drawn shades. Allison was seated at the desk, his head bowed into his hands.

For five minutes Darlington watched him, then making his decision, he turned to the Union Exchange at the end of the block and climbed the stairs to Roberts' room.

Roberts was not pleased to see him. Angrily he said, "You're not supposed

to come here and you know it."

Darlington's pride had already suffered this night, but he took this slur without changing expression. "No one saw me," he said. "It's very late. The lobby's empty."

Roberts was not appeased. "What do you want here, anyway?"

"I wanted to ask you," said Darlington, "if you'll guarantee the payment of the twenty thousand Allison lost tonight?"

Roberts started. "You mean he was gambling?"

"You can call it that," said Darlington. "He owes me twenty thousand. I've told him that I want it by morning."

"You're a fool to trust him," Roberts said. "He hasn't got twenty thousand dollars."

"He'll get it," said Darlington. "He's afraid of me. Right now he's sitting down in your bank thinking about it."

"Oh," said Roberts. "He is, is he?" Turning, he moved to his writing table, opened a drawer and lifted out a pistol. This he put in his belt. "Come on, Phil," he said.

They descended the stairs in silence, stepping out of the front door into the shadow of the overhead gallery. As they did so, both of them saw Gale round the corner off of Adams and walk slowly toward the bandstand in the Square.

Neither of them moved. They watched Gale stop and lean against the Hangman's Oak, saw the flare as he lighted his cigar, and then the small fountain of sparks as he hurled it away and moved over to enter the Holbrook House.

"Something's bothering him," Darlington said.

"Yes," said Roberts. "Maybe we can bother him some more. Come on."

Allison was no longer at the desk when they peered in. He was down on his knees. The door of the big safe was opened and Allison, surrounded by pokes, was pouring a small quantity of gold dust from each of the leather bags.

Roberts pushed open the door. Allison turned, his face whitening.

"Why, Matt!" he said. "I . . ."

Roberts shot him through the head.

Even Darlington was shocked, but Roberts was coolly unmoved. He pushed the gambler out of the building. "If you hope to collect that twenty thousand, Phil, you'll back up what I say." Then he was running lightly across the Square. Darlington followed him.

Larkin, rubbing sleep from his eyes, was just coming out of the jail when Roberts pushed him back inside.

"What was that?" said Larkin. "What was that shot?"

"Gale killed Allison," said Roberts.

"What?"

"That's right. Both Darlington and I saw it. Gale asked for an appointment tonight. I was too busy to see him. I told Allison to talk to him."

The marshal's face showed his surprise. "What did Gale want with you?"

"I don't know," said Roberts. "But I think his bank's in trouble. I think he hoped to get help from us. I can only guess. But I imagine that after he had told Allison his story and Geoffry refused to help, Gale lost his head and shot him."

The marshal was a careful man. He knew the inner working of the town. Roberts and Darlington represented both sides of Washington Street. Gale was an outsider.

"Phil," said Larkin, "did you see it?"

In the interval, before he answered, Darlington knew he held Carolina in the palm of his hand. His decision was colored by two things—his resentment at Cherry's interest in Gale and his love for money. Once he testified for Roberts, he was inexorably bound to the man. But if he told the truth, he would lose twenty thousand dollars and Gale would control Carolina. He made his bet.

"That's what happened," he said. "Allison was in my place. I walked out after him and he told me he had an appointment with Gale at the bank. After awhile there was a shot and Gale ran out. I got there the same time Matt did. Gale ran across to Holbrook House. He threw the gun into the Square. It was Matt who thought to pick it up."

Larkin took the gun from Roberts' hand, making his decision. "All right," he said. "Let's go find Gale."

X

SITTING on the edge of the bed, Gale heard the pound of boots rising on the stairs. Doors along the hall opened and closed. Sleeping voices protested angrily. Curiosity lifted him to his feet

and he stepped out into the hallway, still fully dressed.

Larkin had almost reached his door. The marshal stopped, staring.

Gale said, "What's the excitement?"

"You," said Larkin. "I'm looking for you." He swung up his gun and pushed it against Gale's side. "Why did you kill Allison?"

"Allison?" said Gale. Behind the marshal he saw Roberts and Darlington. "What is this?"

Telfair came out of his room and seeing this, held back. But Spencer Morehouse pushed forward, jostling Larkin. "Have you lost your mind, Les?" Spencer said. "Who says Gale killed Allison?"

"Roberts and Darlington. They both saw him."

"Those two? Why wouldn't they say a thing like that?"

"Now wait a minute," said Larkin. He looked at Gale. "What have you got to say about this?"

"I hardly knew Allison," said Gale. "Start using your head, Larkin."

"I'm using it," said Larkin. "What are you doing here? Why are you all dressed up this time of night?"

"I came here to sleep," said Gale. "I just got here."

"That's a good one," said Larkin. "You with a house and a nice wife, so you come here to sleep." He put out a hand and touched Gale's shirt. "Warm and sweaty," Larkin went on. "You could have got that way running." He was now fully convinced.

"Listen," said Gale. "Don't you realize, that of all the men in camp, Roberts has the most to gain by doing this?"

"I'm not the alcalde," said Larkin. "You can tell him anything you want to, in the morning. Come on."

"Wait a minute," said Morehouse. "Maybe Gale doesn't want to go with you?" He looked at Gale, brightly.

"Keep out of it, Spencer," said Gale. "No use both of us being arrested. Get Kellogg down here." Gale moved out ahead of Larkin, not even bothering to glance at Roberts or Darlington.

In the jail office, Larkin indicated a cot in the corner. "I'll have to keep you in here. The back of the cell, where Charley broke out, hasn't been fixed yet. But don't try anything, Gale. It won't do you any good."

Gale stepped to the barred window that overlooked the Square. The thick branches of the Hangman's Oak stood out menacingly against the lightening sky. It was nearly morning and he turned back to the cot. "Mind if I sleep?"

He was barely settled down when Morehouse returned with Wilson Kellogg. Gale rose, looking past them for Prudence, but she did not appear.

Kellogg, seeing that look said quickly, "I made her stay home, Ward. She's upset and I don't want her around now. This is serious."

"You got here quick enough," Gale said.

"I was ready to leave for Sonora," said Kellogg. "Another five minutes and I would have been gone." He turned to Larkin and his oratorical pompousness came back, and he was a lawyer again. "Now, sir, let's have the facts."

Larkin repeated Roberts' charges and Darlington's testimony. Kellogg chuckled, confident. "This is the most absurd thing I've ever heard. With me defending Mr. Gale, we'll laugh them out of town."

"I wouldn't be too sure," said Larkin, stubbornly. "I'm going to have a few things to say. For instance, why was Gale at the Holbrook House instead of being at home with his wife?"

Kellogg turned slowly on Gale. "Yes, where were you last night, Ward?"

"I was walking in the hills," said Gale. "I couldn't sleep."

"No, Ward," said Cherry Darlington. She stood in the doorway, her hair loose about her shoulders, a scarlet wrapper drawn tight about her body, her small feet showing through the lacings of native sandals. "Tell them the truth. Tell them why you couldn't have killed Geoffry Allison. Tell them you were with me all the time. It makes no difference to me."

"No," said Gale. "How could I tell them that?"

"Then I'll tell them," she said. She looked at Larkin, then at Kellogg. "He was with me. I'll testify he was with me."

Kellogg's face whitened until the tight drawn skin across his cheekbones matched the color of his beard. Larkin was embarrassed and turned away.

"Cherry," said Morehouse, pleadingly. "You don't know what you're doing.

This won't help and it isn't the truth."

Cherry moved her head and looked out at the Hangman's Oak. When she turned back she shuddered. "It is the truth," she said. "Who knows better than I do?"

"That's right, madam," said Wilson Kellogg. "Who should know better than you? But your testimony won't do any good." Without another word he left the office.

LARKIN was in the middle of the Square helping to set up the tables for the alcalde's court which would convene at one o'clock. Gale, at the front window, was watching the groups of miners drifting into town when he saw Prudence moving toward the jail, along Silver.

Anticipation heartened him and he was shocked when she swerved, just short of the jail and cut over to the Square side of the street. Everyone turned to look at her. She was the center of interest, but she held her head high and spoke to no one.

Reaching Washington, she crossed the street and walked deliberately into Darlington's Saloon. This stopped all activity in the Square.

A minute later the side door of Darlington's opened and Cherry appeared followed by Prudence. They stood face to face in the sunbaked alley, talking for a full five minutes. Then, without a backward glance, Prudence walked away from the Darlington girl and recrossed Washington.

This time she made no effort to avoid the jail, but came directly to the barred window and looked in on Gale. Her eyes were deep, dark pools in her drawn face and it hurt Gale to see the marks of grief there.

"Prudence," he said. "You shouldn't have done that."

"There are a lot of things that should never have been done," said Prudence. "But I had to talk to her."

"I wasn't with her last night," said Ward.

"I know it," said Prudence. "She told me. But she's going to swear, at the trial, that you were."

"I won't let her," said Gale.

"She'll do it anyway. She loves you, Ward. Do you love her? No . . . don't answer that." She spoke quickly before he had a chance to make his denial. "I had no right to ask that."

"You're my wife," he said. "You have every right."

"No. But don't worry, Ward. No matter what happens at the trial, I'll get you free. I think I've found a way."

"Don't do anything foolish," he said. "Not for me. I've caused too many people too much trouble, already. This will turn out all right. Your father will get me out of it."

There was pity in the look she gave him, then she was gone, hurrying.

"Prudence!" Gale called after her. "Prudence!" But she did not come back.

Gale was beside himself. Since Prudence had made the trip across Washington and the town had seen her talking to Cherry Darlington, he had somehow to prevent the gambler's sister from testifying. For five minutes he paced the jail office like a caged animal, coming back to the window again and again. Finally he saw Morehouse rushing along Silver and heard the little man shout.

"Larkin," said Morehouse. "I want into the jail. I have to see Gale."

The marshal came rumbling across the beaten ground, bringing out his keys as he walked. Still muttering, he unlocked the door. Morehouse brushed past him and Larkin stepped into the room.

Gale seized the little man's shoulder. "Spence, where's Prudence gone? What's she up to?"

"I don't know," said Morehouse. "I don't care. There's the devil to pay. Kellogg's drunk. I tried to sober him up but I can't. He's stinking drunk. You know what that means, Ward? An hour after the trial, you'll be dead. You'll be hanging from that tree out there. Wilson's the only man in camp that might convince the miners that Roberts is lying. And the fool had to get drunk. He started drinking as soon as he heard what Cherry said this morning."

Gale shrugged. "I had an idea he would. He promised me that if I ever hurt his daughter, he'd kill me. This way is as good as another."

"But what are we going to do?" said Morehouse.

"What can we do?" Gale said, and turned to face the marshal. "What would you do, Les?"

"What can you do?" said Larkin, and threw his hands wide.

Gale hit him. Larkin's body slammed against the jail wall and slid down.

"Now what?" said Morehouse. "We'd never live as far as Adams Street."

GALE was already stooping, recovering Larkin's keys. The building was divided in half by an iron grating, the rear portion a cell. Larkin had locked the heavy door in this grating, barring Gale from that hole in the rear wall through which Charley Royer had made his escape.

Morehouse laughed shortly. "I never thought of that." He caught up Larkin's gun and pressed it into Gale's hand. "Let's go."

They squirmed through the hole in the rear wall and sprinted down the alley without meeting anyone. Not until they had gained the hills above the town did they pause for breath.

"Tonight," said Morehouse, as they rested, "I'll get a pair of horses. You want to head south into the ranch country, or do you want to try for San Francisco?"

"Neither," said Gale. "How many of the crews can you trust?"

"Most of them," said Morehouse. "What do they have to do with it?"

"Everything," said Gale. "Nothing has changed. What I want and what has to be done, is right here. Hit out for the nearest camp. Get a horse there and pick up a hundred men. Pick men who own good guns. We're going to cross Roberts' flume tonight."

"You're crazy," said Morehouse. "If you stay around here they'll hang you."

"When we start to cross Roberts' flume," said Gale, "the miners will take sides. With a hundred armed men around me, I'll be much safer than I have been at any moment since Roberts knew that I had arrived in this country. As soon as it's dark, I'll meet you at the top of Yankee Hill."

Morehouse protested, but Gale went on with his orders. "Send word to Aruup to move the material up to the crossing by ten o'clock tonight. Not sooner. Now get at it. You don't have much time."

"Ward . . ." Morehouse began, then he shrugged and reluctantly pushed on.

Gale stayed where he was and watched the day wear out. From his timbered covert he had a fair view of the town and could see the river trail. Larkin and four men spurred up it within the first hour. Later, a larger group, headed by Chauncey Burns, rode northward and Gale knew these were Roberts' men.

All afternoon, the country swarmed with men and riders searching the rough hills. But none wasted time looking for him so close to town.

As the shadows lengthened, the hunters drifted back. Larkin was almost the last, sitting astride his tired horse dispiritedly. Losing two prisoners in so short a time had not been good for the man's pride.

With nightfall, Gale shifted eastward toward the rendezvous.

MOREHOUSE had done a good job. Better than a hundred men lay on their guns, staring at the small fire marking the camp of Roberts' guards. Gale moved along the line, giving his last minute instructions.

"Make a tight circle. Don't let one of them get through. If word gets back to town of what we're doing, we'll be doing more fighting than working." He picked out a tall, rangy man. "As soon as we get them, Evans, take ten men and guard the trails. If you see anything, shoot. We want plenty of warning. But don't mistake our supply wagons."

Morehouse led one contingent away and Gale worked closer to the fire. He was barely twenty yards away when the shrill whistle broke the night. Roberts' guards were instantly alert. They came to their feet, peering into the dark.

Gale called, "Hold it, boys. You haven't got a chance. Listen." He called louder. "Start counting."

"One," said some man behind him. "Two," the next man echoed. "Three. Four. Five." It went on, the voices swinging around the circle. Before they had reached twenty, the guard captain called, "What do you want?"

"Lay your guns down," Gale ordered, "and line up along the flume."

They obeyed in sullen silence. Gale's crew closed in. Well organized, they secured the prisoners, then seizing their tools, sprang to work.

By the time the first wagon load of material came over the rim, they had ripped the brush and timber from the new right-of-way, and already were digging holes from the stone supports of the trestle, working by the light of flaming tar barrels.

Gale moved up and down the line as wagon after wagon drew in, coming in

order, the supports first, the bracing next, the timber for the flume last. Ready-cut, it rose like magic, each piece fitting perfectly, due to Aruup's planning.

As the last wagon dragged up the grade, Roberts' ditch was crossed and only one small section of flume remained to connect with the point where the gravity ditch would take off toward town.

Gale was surprised to see Aruup swing down from the high driver's seat. The merchant, usually dry and taciturn, was more morose than ever.

Gale said, "Cheer up, Emil. My neck feels good so far."

"My neck wouldn't feel good if it were holding up your head," said Aruup. "Running out proved Roberts' case better than anything he could have done in open court. Why didn't you wait and give us a chance, friend?"

"I had my reasons," said Gale, shortly. "Don't you realize if this crossing wasn't made and the ditch completed, that everything would be lost, the money wasted, the bank busted."

"Everything is lost," said Aruup, quietly. "The bank is busted. You're crossing won't help, Mr. Gale."

"What do you mean?"

The older man looked at him keenly. "I've never questioned you. I'm not questioning you now. All I know is that a man who claims to be a real representative of the House of Rothschild, arrived on the evening stage. He has spoken to Telfair and made his announcement. It appears your friend Telfair is an impostor."

"What happened?" said Gale. "Did Telfair run out?"

Aruup shook his head. "He didn't run. He and Ben Derksen have locked themselves in the bank building."

"You mean they're there alone? Without help?"

"They're without help," said Aruup, and a faint smile twisted his mouth. "But not alone. Ben invited the Rothschild man to stay with them."

Gale turned and yelled to Morehouse and the small man came running. His immaculate clothes were dirty and ruined. The grime of the night's work streaked his face, but he was grinning. "Hey, Emil! What do you think of her?" He gestured toward the trestle. "Roberts is beat now."

"No," said Gale. "We're beat now. I've got to get to town." He told Morehouse quickly what had happened.

"You can't go to town now," said Aruup. "You'll never dare show yourself again. They'd hang you now without even bothering about a trial."

"I can't leave Derksen and Telfair there," said Gale. "This isn't their fault. I got Telfair into this hole. I'll have to get him out."

"Sure," said Morehouse. "Go on down there and get hung. Don't worry about yourself. Always think of the other fellow."

"What would you do?" said Gale.

"You stay here and I'll go down," said Morehouse. "I got Telfair into this."

Aruup looked from one to the other. "There's no need of anyone going until morning," he said. "The news came too late for the trouble to start tonight. Most of the miners who had come in for the trial have already headed back for their claims. But by morning the news will be around. Roberts will see to that. That's when the trouble will begin. I know you'll both go down there. I know I'll go with you. There are certain things a man just has to do."

THE sun was well up when the lumbering freight wagons, loaded with armed men, came into Washington and made the turn around the Holbrook House. The news of their approach had preceded them and the swelling crowd, already gathered before the water company office, turned sullenly to stare.

The miners had come in armed, and Gale, riding the first wagon, sensed the explosive tension of the throng. Anything could happen. Had he been alone, he knew he would have never gained the bank. It would be touch and go now.

He had a hundred men. There were twenty thousand packed into the Square, but they were leaderless. His hundred were well organized. It all depended on decisions now. He gave the crowd no time to think, no chance to solidify. Deliberately he drove his team against their ranks.

They gave way grudgingly, but they gave, and in their giving lost the initiative.

Roberts rose to the bandstand, shouting at them, demanding Gale. But the second wagon was already turning into the Square. The third team followed at

its tailboard. Then the fourth. And some unknown miner riding this rig looked down and saw a friend.

"Hello, Jake," he yelled. "Come in to see the fun, did you?"

He got his answer and a laugh and Gale used the resulting lull to gain the bank. With Morehouse at his heels he moved quickly through the door and heard Ben Derksen say, "Why I'm glad to see you, Mr. Gale." There was enormous relief in the fat man's voice.

Telfair was unshaven and disheveled. A well dressed stranger sat at the desk. This man, more angry than afraid, came to his feet.

"Are you the head of these pirates?"

"Sit down," said Ben Derksen, wearily. "Why I guess I've told you a hundred times to sit down."

"Let be, Ben," Telfair said. "Let Ward handle this." He wiped the heel of his hand across his tired eyes. "Gale, this is Featherstone. From London. He's a Rothschild man."

"So I've heard," said Gale.

Featherstone said, "Mr. Gale, you people have misused the Rothschild name. You've laid yourself liable to any suit we care to bring against you. What have you got to say for yourself?"

The marks of the night's work showed on Gale's drawn face, but there was almost humor in his voice. "Featherstone," he said, "I'd like to be able to worry about that. But there's twenty thousand men out there in the Square. They're waiting to hang me. Go ahead and sue."

The door behind Gale burst open. Derksen swung his gun around, then seeing it was Kellogg, let the sawed off weapon sag.

The lawyer, red-eyed and jumpy, paid no attention to anyone save Gale. "Where's Prudence?" he demanded. "What have you done with her?"

Gale slowly shook his head. "I haven't seen Prudence since yesterday afternoon. I have no idea where she is."

"That's right, Wilson," said Morehouse. "I've been with Ward all the time. I haven't seen Prudence."

Kellogg's shoulders slumped. "Then she's gone," he said. "She took my horse and rode away." He looked at Gale, bitterly. "I can't say that I blame her."

Gale backed up against the desk and sat down. Featherstone tried to talk to him, but Morehouse cut him off.

"Let him alone," the little man ordered. "You're so damned concerned about the name of Rothschild. You could make the name of Rothschild honored in every gold camp in California, this morning. All you have to do is step to that door and tell those miners that the Rothschilds will guarantee the payment of their deposits."

"Really," said Featherstone. "Do you expect my house to put up several hundred thousand dollars to save your miserable necks? You're nothing but cheap swindlers, the whole lot of you."

"No," said Telfair, and plopped a ledger down in front of Featherstone. "Here. Look at this. Every dollar is accounted for. All the money which isn't here in this room, is invested in the water company and this bank holds stock in this water company as collateral. As soon as Roberts' flume is crossed, as soon as the remaining four miles of ditch is dug, that stock will be worth much more than face value. Much more than the loan."

MOREHOUSE cut in. "The crossing has already been made. We made it last night. All that remains now is to dig the ditch. All that takes is labor."

In spite of himself, the Englishman was impressed. He studied the ledger sheets with a practiced eye. "Everything seems to be in order on paper. But a bank has no right to make such huge loans solely from deposits."

"Don't blame them," said Gale. "I stole the money. I forced Telfair to make the loan."

Featherstone looked at him, sharply. "And how much stock do you hold in the water company, Mr. Gale? How much do you stand to make when this ditch is completed?"

Gale looked suprised. Morehouse let a peculiar expression turn down his lips.

"Why," said Gale, "I don't own a share. Outside of a few shares sold in Stockton, no one owns a share except this bank."

"And who owns the bank?" said Featherstone.

Gale looked at Telfair. Telfair shook his head. "I don't know. There isn't any stock in the bank. I never thought of it before. I guess the depositors own it, don't they?"

Featherstone looked from one to the other, amazed. "There's something here I don't understand," he said. "If these

books are correct, and you're all telling me the truth, it seems that you've built a water company which you don't own and operated a bank in which you have no claim. If this were taken to a court of law, I would guess that the ruling would be that both the bank and the water company would revert to the depositors since theirs are the only funds involved in the transaction. And, if what you tell me about the water company is true, I would say they are very lucky."

"They're lucky enough," said Morehouse. "Telfair and I outsmarted ourselves. Gale had his own reasons."

Kellogg roused himself. "Mr. Featherstone," he said, "this has been a most revealing talk. Whatever else I can say, I can tell you that every dollar that has gone out of this bank has been expended for the water company. Emil Aruup had the spending of it. And there isn't a more honest man in California."

"Wilson," said Morehouse. "Now you're talking. You're the one man in camp the miners believe in. Get out there and tell them that as soon as the ditch is finished, not only will their money be safe, but each depositor will have made a profit. You can do it, Wilson. Even now they'll believe you."

"Yes," said Kellogg. "I can do that."

"Well do it," said Morehouse.

Kellogg slowly shook his head, his brooding eyes on Gale. "No. Not yet. I will not speak until you give Ward Gale to those men outside."

"Why I guess we aren't going to do that," said Ben Derksen. "We'll never do that. Not if they tear this building down, brick by brick."

"Listen to them," urged Kellogg, as the clamor grew, outside. "Maybe you've never seen a mob, Ben."

"I've seen them," said Derksen, simply, "but I've never run from one."

THE noise increased, and Gale glanced out at the line of armed men Aruup had drawn up before the bank. He was startled to see it give and break. But more startled when he saw Prudence come through. She had Larkin by the arm. Together, they came on in.

"Ward," she said. "Ward. Are you all right?"

"You shouldn't be here," Gale told her. He caught Kellogg's arm. "Get her out of here, Wilson. Get her out of here, quick."

"Wait," said Prudence. "There's no danger now. They know about it. Larkin read it from the bandstand. Here, read it yourself, Ward. You're free."

"That's right," said Larkin, rubbing his jaw and looking at Gale speculatively. "I don't know how she worked it. It's the first time I ever heard of the Governor pardoning a man before he was tried."

"I didn't know you had got away," said Prudence, "until Larkin told me. But I convinced the Governor you were innocent."

"How?" asked her father.

She looked at him, then looked away. "Well, it wasn't me alone, exactly. But when forty thousand people petition the governor that a man is innocent, there isn't much else he could do except issue a pardon."

"Forty thousand?" said Kellogg. "Petition? You took my petitions?"

"Yes," she said. "I took your petitions. I cut off the top and wrote a new plea asking the governor, in the name of the undersigned, to free Ward Gale, who had been unjustly convicted of a crime he had not committed."

Inside the office there was no sound. But outside, above the medley of noise, one voice rose sharply. "I don't care if he is pardoned. He stole our money. Let's get him."

Prudence stared at Gale, the color draining from her tired face. "What do they mean?"

Gale caught her hand. "There's no time to tell you now. But thanks for what you have done." He turned to Featherstone. "Will you step outside with me?"

"Gladly," said Featherstone, glancing at Derksen.

"Give me a hand, Ben," said Gale, and dragged the office desk through the door.

Only the thin line of Aruup's armed men separated him from the crowd as he climbed to the desk top. A half brick sailed past his ear and shattered the window behind him.

"Go ahead," he said. "Throw another one. You think bricks will get your money back?"

"Hanging might!" someone yelled up at him.

"Go ahead and hang me," said Gale. "See if that gets your money back. You have deposited two hundred and thirty-five thousand dollars in this bank.

There's thirty-five thousand left inside. If we pay you off this morning, you'd each receive about fourteen cents on the dollar."

An angry roar greeted him. "Wait a minute," said Gale. "The money isn't lost. Every penny of it is invested in your water ditch. Mr. Featherstone will tell you, if you'll listen to him. He'll tell you the bank's been honestly run. Not one penny has been used for anything except the loan."

"We want our money!"

"You'll get your money as soon as the ditch is finished. Tell them, Featherstone."

The slight Englishman stepped up to his side. "Gentlemen," he said, "I represent Rothschilds. I came here believing these men to be swindlers. But I have been over the books. Everything Gale has told you is true. Mr. Telfair has done a good job. As soon as the water ditch is completed, every depositor in this bank will have made money, rather than lost it."

"Yeah?" shouted someone. "How's the ditch gonna get finished?"

"That's up to you," said Gale. "Last night we did the thing you said couldn't be done. We crossed Roberts' flume. All that's needed now is labor. You men are miners. You're used to working with pick and shovel. Will you give one day of your time to finishing the ditch? It's that near done and it's up to you. Your money and your future depends on it. Now, what will you do? Hang me, or give yourselves a day's work?"

Silence rolled slowly across the crowd. There were shrewd men here who had forsaken profitable enterprises to search for a quicker fortune in the gold fields. Gale's words had cooled their unreasoning temper. And now, from his place on a high wagon, Emil Aruup turned the tide.

"I'll work a day," he yelled. "I'll work a week if I have to. Let's go."

His words were echoed by the armed men about him. Some of the mob took up the shout. In a moment a thousand men had thrown their hands into the air. The crowd swayed, gave way a little and the protests of Roberts' followers were lost in the gathering roar.

"Come on! Let's work."

Gale jumped down from the desk and pushed boldly out into the crowd. He was the first man up Washington Street. As he made the turn, the miners falling in behind him, he saw Matt Roberts and Phil Darlington standing in the alley beside the saloon, their anger mirrored on their tight drawn faces.

XI

FIVE hours before they had wanted to hang him. Now as Gale walked along the right-of-way, coordinating the operation, they glanced up, grinning, jovial, bound to him by the common interest of labor shared.

These men had been toughened by long months of work in the gold riddled gulches. It was amazing how much earth they moved, their energies once directed to the task.

All along the four mile stretch, men sweated shoulder to shoulder. Twenty thousand of them. "There'll never be a thing like this again," said Spencer Morehouse, who walked beside Gale, impressed. "Why didn't we think of this before?"

"Sometimes," said Gale, "it's hard to get men to work to their own advantage. Sometimes a man gets a thing stuck in his mind and it blinds him to everything else. You can be proud of this ditch, Spence."

Morehouse glanced at him, sideways. "I suppose so. But I never thought it would all turn out like this. I wish it had turned out better for you."

"All I've done is mark a little time," said Gale.

"You've broken Roberts in Carolina," Morehouse pointed out. "The money for this ditch would have gone into his bank. All the materials came in by way of Aruup's wagons. It was Aruup who profited, not Roberts. Now you can go after Matt's stage lines and boats."

"No," said Gale. "I won't bother about that."

"Then what are you going to do? Kill him?"

"I don't know," said Gale. "Right now I'm tired."

But tired as he was, they drove on into the night. Gale knew that if they stopped, at least half the men would fail to return on the morrow.

At midnight, he and Morehouse stood at the control gate above the crossing at Roberts' flume and listened as the word came back from town, relayed

from man to man. "Done! Done! Done!"

"Turn it on, Spence," said Gale. It's your ditch."

"Kellogg should be here," said Morehouse. "He thought of it first." But he was not displeased to knock the wedges from the holding gate. The water rushed across the new section and into the freshly dug ditch.

"Done," said Gale.

They stood there for an hour, watching the water from the Stanislaus rush past them. Then Morehouse put his hand against Gale and gave him a gentle shove.

"Go home, Ward. It's all over."

Gale did not answer. He turned and walked slowly away from the little man standing there in the dark. All the way down the grade of the ditch, men stood on the fresh banks watching the flowing water. They turned to speak to him, but he did not answer them.

In the grayness of dawn he came at last to Kellogg's house and stood there looking at the dark windows. Then he continued on toward the deserted Square. Unconsciously, he repeated Spencer's words. "It's all over."

Walking aimlessly, he approached the bandstand, hardly conscious of what he did. He was bone tired, beat out, but there was nothing inviting about the Holbrook House with its narrow, stuffy rooms.

He reached the Oak and glanced up at the rope-scarred limb. Yesterday morning, in the bank, he had been closer to it than he was now. The thought brought a humorless twist to his lips. He sat down with his back against the rough bark, feeling a certain kinship with the tree. It stood alone in an empty place.

With his big hands drooping between his knees, he let his head go forward and dozed. But he could not have slept long. The sun was not yet up, the ragged morning mists not yet risen when he opened his eyes and saw the boots standing close beside him.

Slowly, he tilted his head upward and Matt Roberts stared down at him. The man's face was gray-drawn, his voice toneless, yet harsh.

"I could have killed you, Ward," he said. "I sat in my office window and held a gun in my hand for a long time. I had you in my sights. But there was no satisfaction in that. There's too much between us to settle with gunfire. I'm going to kill you with my hands. That's the way I killed Pete, Ward."

Without warning, then, he struck with his heavy boots.

PURE reflex made Gale roll. The boot heel struck the side of his head, but only a glancing blow. The pain brought him sharply awake. He was on his hands and knees when Roberts rushed. Flattening, he rolled beneath the man, upsetting him.

They came up together. Gale planted his feet and waited for Roberts. He was too tired, he had been through too much to carry the fight. Roberts had asked for it. Let him come and get it.

Roberts rushed him. Gale made no attempt to avoid the man. Their bodies crashed together. Gale went back a yard with that impact, but he held his feet. He drove a fist into Roberts' face.

He had long looked forward to this, but now there was no joy in it for him. He fought grimly and doggedly because he had to, because he knew he was fighting for his life. Roberts was savage.

There was no science, no attempt to evade a blow, almost no sound. Their shuffling feet stirred up and marred the packed dirt. There was no sense of passing time. There was nothing save the sound of heavy blows, the panting gasps of shortened breaths.

Roberts' face was almost unrecognizable, bloody and meaty. Gale's arms grew heavier and heavier until it was torment to lift them. Until he thought each blow would be his last.

Roberts stumbled and put his head against Gale's chest, leaning on him. Gale tried to push him away. He couldn't. He swayed sideways then and Roberts fell.

Gale stood over him, forcing his mind to be interested in Roberts' attempt to push himself up. The man failed twice. Finally he managed to come to his knees. He rested there, looking around, facing Gale without seeing him, then began to crawl painfully around the Square, trying to orient himself.

Gale watched him with utter detachment. Then too weary to move, he sank down against the tree.

Gradually, his mind shook off the fogging exhaustion, but he sat still, having the Square to himself. Roberts had gained his Express Office and disap-

peared, wedging himself erect in the doorway.

The sun's first rays glittered on the barrel of the pistol in Roberts' hand. He raised it, then seeming dissatisfied with the distance, came forward with short uneven steps until he had crossed Gold and stood in the Square. Here he stopped, each motion deliberate, and again raised the gun.

Gale watched him curiously. There was nothing he could do.

Roberts' first shot struck the bark above his head and Gale remembered how coming into town on Roberts' stage, this tree had caught his first attention. Now it would be the last thing he would see.

Then Ben Derksen's voice filled the Square and the sound of his lumbering tread rushed past Gale. The fat man's shotgun was leveled before him.

Roberts was swinging his gun toward this threat. Gale thought the fat man had gone crazy. Ben kept running right at Roberts. Roberts fired. The bullet, striking Derksen, broke his stride and made him stagger. But he kept on.

Roberts' second bullet dropped him. Ben went first to his knees, then sat back slowly. "Why, Matt!" he cried. "I guess you've killed me. Damn these sawed barrels, anyway. With a long gun I'd of got you from across the street."

He pulled both triggers at once. The recoil knocked him flat, but the heavy slugs almost tore Roberts in two.

From somewhere, Gale found the strength to rise and run. He dropped down beside Derksen and the fat man opened his eyes.

"Ben," said Gale. "How bad is it? You didn't mean that."

"It's all right," said Ben. "I had it coming."

"Like hell," said Gale. "You had nothing like this coming."

"Why I guess I can judge that," said Ben, his round face turning gray. "You don't know, Ward. I'm the one who told Prudence you didn't love her. Tell me, I lied to her didn't I?"

Gale stared down at him. "Yes, Ben," he said. "You lied."

"Good," said Ben. He was smiling when he died.

FROM behind the curtained window, Prudence saw Gale stop before the house. She wanted to rush out to him. He looked so weary and slack shouldered and so alone. But it was better that she wait, better that he should come inside and find again what she had so long denied him.

Instead of turning in he moved away, heading for the Square. With one hand she ripped the curtain aside and started to call after him. Then she remembered Cherry Darlington. Blindly she groped back to a chair beside the table littered with Gale's belongings.

She sank down and sat there a long time. There had been so many mistakes made since that night on the river boat, and she blamed her pride. Cherry Darlington had pride, but that pride had not prevented the girl from being willing to testify for Gale, no matter at what cost.

She was on her feet in an instant when the step sounded upon the porch. He was coming back. He had changed his mind. He hadn't gone to Darlington's.

"Come in. Ward! Come in."

"It isn't Ward," said Spencer Morehouse, stepping in the door. "I thought I'd find him here. Haven't you seen him?"

"I've seen him," said Prudence. Her voice was lifeless. "He passed the house awhile ago. He's gone on to Darlington's."

Morehouse looked at her. "I don't believe that."

"Where else would he go?"

"I don't know," said Morehouse. Then, with an almost studied brutalness, "Do you care?"

"What good would it do to care?" she said.

"Do you love him?" asked Morehouse.

"I've always loved him. I'm a fool, Spencer. I had him and I didn't know it. Look." She turned quickly to the littered table. "I was gathering up his things last night, thinking he'd want them to go away. I found this book. Look on the fly leaf."

Morehouse took the book and read aloud the message Gale had written while pinned behind his dead horse by Charley Royer's bullets. When he finished he looked at the girl. "You fool. What are you waiting for?"

"A lot has happened since he wrote that," she said. "He wasn't interested in Cherry Darlington then."

"Let me tell you about Ward and

Cherry Darlington," said Morehouse. "Cherry knew Telfair was a shoe salesman and not a banker. She threatened to expose the whole game unless Ward was nice to her."

Prudence stiffened. "That woman did that?"

"Don't blame Cherry," said Morehouse, sharply. "She liked Gale. I'm afraid she loves him. She's had a rough time, Prudence. At least think kindly of her. I don't know where Ward is, but believe me, he's not at Darlington's this morning."

Prudence stood up. "One thing more, Spencer. What's between Ward and Matt Roberts?"

"Roberts is a thief," said Morehouse, and suddenly found the word distasteful. "He stole Ward's ship and he murdered Ward's brother who was her captain."

Prudence started to speak. A pistol shot cut across the morning stillness. A second and then a third, followed by a shotgun's roar.

Wordless, they both ran into the street. Doors were opening and people looked out as they ran along the block into the Square, both driven by the same fear.

Prudence saw Gale's hunched figure first. Then she saw Derksen huddled at his side. And in the middle of Gold, Roberts lay. She choked, "He's dead!" and raced forward so swiftly Morehouse could not keep up, so that she reached Gale first. Dropping to her knees beside him she grabbed him by the arm. "Ward! Ward!"

He straightened. He had been sitting, his shoulders hunched down, his head buried against his crossed arms.

"Prudence."

"Ward. Where are you hurt?"

"Hurt?" he said. "I'm all right, Prudence. It's Ben who's hurt. Roberts killed him."

Prudence looked at Derksen and tears came to her eyes. Gale put his arm around her. People drifted into the Square from all sides, the Washington Street deadline forgotten for the moment.

Larkin came, looked down upon Ben Derksen and then moved on toward Roberts, mumbling to himself. Gale paid no attention to the man or the gathering crowd.

"You better go home," Gale finally said to Prudence. He rose and pulled her up.

"Home?" she said. "What's there for me? You passed the house this morning and didn't stop."

He looked down at her. "No," he said. "I didn't stop. I didn't know whether or not there was any use."

"Come," she said. "Let's both of us go and see."

A LITTLE sadly, Spencer Morehouse watched them go. Then, with one last look at Derkson, he walked thoughtfully toward the Holbrook House. Just before he reached the door he raised his head and saw Cherry Darlington. The girl stood in the alley's mouth, directly across Washington.

"Spencer," she said. "Is Roberts dead?"

"Dead as dust," said Morehouse. "It's as if he were never in this town."

"Phil must have seen it coming," she said. "He put his money on Roberts and lost the bet. He left last night. He won't be back, ever. I need a man to help me run the place."

Without a word Morehouse started toward her. But before he reached the sidewalk's edge, she called out warningly.

"Wait a minute, Spencer. Think. If you cross this street for me, there's no going back."

He smiled at her. "There's nothing over here I want," he said. And without breaking his stride he crossed Washington.

NEXT ISSUE'S FEATURED NOVEL

BROTHER OF THE KID

By PAUL EVAN LEHMAN

the AFFAIR at

Tom Longbow, the lone wolf scout

who was neither red man nor white, made his

decision at that waterhole rendezvous—

and kept his oath through peril, flame and disaster!

STINKING WELL

I

THE AFFAIR at Stinking Well began and ended with one man. There are reports, yellowed now, in the War Department files, which give the details. But written in cramped letters, naming names and figures, they are for statisticians, not for men whose eyes see farther than the present.

They give a few facts, dry item by dry item, but they really mean nothing. They but detail the report of a few men dying. They ignore the fact that a nation died and another nation came to full power on that murky desert night. They tell of a rendezvous and a quadruple murder and ignore the man who brought such things about.

And of that man—

His name was Longbow, Tom Longbow, or at least that was the name written on army records when he signed up as a scout. His real name was unpronounceable and meant, "Man who walks in the desert at night on the blood trail." It had been given him when he was six summers old, the council deciding such a name might bring him honor.

He was white, or at least one-fourth of him was, his white grandmother having been the squaw wife of Nez Perce, who had died on the war trail, leaving little but legends of prowess and eleven scalps swinging darkly from the ridgepole of his home.

His face was dark and the desert sun had blackened it to the shade of leather. His cheek bones were as prominent as knuckles. But his eyes were incongruously blue and his hair more brown than black, and he was tall, even for an Apache.

He was neither white nor red, neither American nor foreigner, but if the knowledge rankled, never did he show it. He moved with the army and he walked with the Indians, and he was not of one

"Get out, or surrender," Tom Longbow pleaded. "You'll die here like rats . . ."

a novelet by WILBUR S. PEACOCK

or the other, and so in reality he was alone.

When the troopers got drunk, he stayed sober, for as an Indian he was not permitted liquor. And when the Indians held ceremony and danced, he sat apart, looking on, for he was a breed, his white blood marking him a stranger for a time.

TOM LONGBOW could track. For a dollar a day he rode ahead of the cavalry, scouting the country, bringing down game, and his name had gone in twice on company reports for gallantry in action. He wore Indian breeches and moccasins, but his blouse was army issue and his hat was the soft-brimmed crush-crown the troopers wore on the march.

His belt was hammered silver, hand-marked with the tent and arrow and rain signs of his people. He wore a stem-winder watch he had won from a trooper in a shooting contest.

He was nothing, a nobody, and yet he was important to many. He was a trooper without rank and was accepted as such—that is, until Major Brekhard came to the Fifth. After that he was but another breed, a scout who took orders and gave no backtalk.

The major took over in April, and the desert cacti were alive with blooms. Violet and pink and white they were, and the illusion of softness was there, masking the flinty earth, draping a mantle over the killing ground which cut a man's heart and his horse's hoofs to ribbons. The mountains rose purple at the horizon, and the summer heat had not yet come to dry the bodies and tempers and souls of men to withered husks.

The first clash between the major and Tom Longbow came the night of Brekhard's arrival at the fort. Longbow was sitting near the table, hand-twisted cigarette dangling from his mouth, when the major stepped around the corner.

"Evening," Tom Longbow said perfunctorily, and bent closer over the length of buffalo bone he was carving into a knife handle.

He heard the slight gasp of air in the major's nostrils and looked up curiously. Spit and polish he had seen, but this officer was a dandy, boots as gleaming as an ebony mirror, his uniform as pressed as the day it was tailored.

"Stand up, trooper!" Major Brekhard snapped. "And say 'Sir' when you speak to me!"

Tom Longbow thought the command over in his deliberate way and then spat silently. His hands, hard hands, were still for a moment.

"I'm no trooper, Major," he said evenly, respectfully. "I'm Tom Longbow. I scout for the troops."

He stared curiously at the new commanding officer. There were tales he had heard, and most of them fitted. This was the man who had been a general in the War Between the States. This was the man who had played his political cards wrong and been banished to a fort on the edge of nowhere.

"Stand up!" Major Brekhard said coldly.

Longbow stood, and that was bad, too, for he towered a head over the officer and the man had to tilt his face to look at him. The major's hand rocked into a fist at his side, then slowly unclenched.

"Longbow," the major said, "I don't know what the custom has been at the fort before today. But in the future, if you wish to keep your job, you will address me as 'Sir' and salute like any other man. Is that understood?"

"Yes, sir," Tom Longbow said.

"Don't forget it," Major Brekhard said and turned away, himself forgetting to salute.

The scout watched him go, and a smile lifted the corners of his heavy mouth. This man had a lot to learn, a great deal for his mind to ingest. He was a parade-ground soldier, and here in the desert there were no parade grounds.

Longbow sat again, work forgotten for a moment, remembering other officers, other men. Some had measured up to the desert, but some had not. The land was hard, but it was honest. It told a man in many ways it had but one purpose—and that was the killing of any who walked its breast. Only men who understood it, men who were as honest in their ways, could hope to match its craftiness and win.

Mess call sounded, the bugler limned against the sunset, and men began to straggle toward the mess hall. Horses were restless in the stables, and the farrier's anvil rang musically, sparks flying into the growing dusk from where he hammered a shoe into shape.

The major was gone now, having dis-

appeared into Officers' Row. Mrs. Callaghan, the sergeant-major's wife, called shrilly to the twins, whose time these past few days had been taken with the task of grooming the half-wild pony they intended to break for riding.

Tom Longbow sighed briefly and scabbarded his knife He inspected the bone he was carving, then flung it away in sudden impatience. Dusting his hands, he strode toward the mess hall, for he ate with the troops. He walked with gliding grace, and his restless eyes took in everything. Three years, now, had he been at the fort, and yet each day he found something new about it.

ENTERING the mess hall, Tom went down the line of tables toward his regular place. Three other men were there, all older and bearded, all scouts, and he nodded casually at them before turning up his tin plate and reaching for the coffee pot.

The sound of talk and laughter rose loudly in the room, and the smell of men and sweat and horses. These were hard men, leather-hard. They would bend but never break. Their humor was loud and crude and friendly, and Tom Longbow relaxed a bit at hearing it.

"Seen the major yet, Tom?" Christiansen asked, and scratched idly at his whiskered chin.

Longbow grinned. "Sorta," he admitted. "He brushed me up for not saluting."

"He'll learn," Matthers said, and dumped salt pork from the K.P.'s pan onto his plate. "Trujillo came in 'bout half an hour ago, bringing news about Running Wolf and his band."

Tom Longbow's brows straightened, and he was conscious of the others' stares. Running Wolf was Apache, his face twisted where a lance had jammed in his mouth and out his cheek. He was ugly, both in body and mind, and the renegade Indians were rousing to his cries. He was the last of a warrior line, and in him was the will of those who had preceded him.

"What did Trujillo have to say?" Longbow asked.

Matthers chewed silently for a second, then swallowed. The clamor in the room was deafening but he gave it no heed, as though they were alone.

"Running Wolf's got Gray Eagle and Ramirona with him now, and he must have three hundred braves, with more coming."

Tom Longbow shivered. He heard the troopers' voices, and he knew some of them would be stilled soon, a bullet or an arrow silencing them forever.

This had been coming for a long time. He had known it, had even predicted it, but his words had vanished unnoticed. The Apaches were the last of the Indian nations to hold out for what they thought belonged to them. No formal treaty was theirs, none would be accepted by men such as Running Wolf. They were renegades, a wolf pack hemmed in by dogs. They would die, but they'd take many of their killers with them.

"What do you figure, Tom?" Christiansen asked curiously.

The breed scout flushed. Always it came like this, as though his Apache blood gave him more of an insight than the others. And yet he could not take offense, for these men were his friends. They understood his problem and accepted him mostly for what he was.

"They'll fight, if necessary," he said finally, and fingered the cup of hot coffee. "They'll listen first, and then if they don't like what they hear there'll be the devil to pay."

"Yeah, like I figure," Matthers said, and went back to eating.

Tom Longbow drank his coffee, then forked food into his mouth. But the beans and pork were tasteless, and he could feel the tightness coming to his nerves again. Twice now had the Apaches risen, and each time men, both red and white, had died. This might be the last time, or the first, of a general uprising, but either-way it was no good.

He knew Running Wolf, for they were cousins. Gray Eagle had been a friend of his father's. Ramirona was a breed, half Mexican, half Indian, with the worst qualities of both, and they had never met. They were the three most dangerous men of the Apache nation, and their rallying call might start a flood which would engulf the entire areas.

Longbow pushed back his chair and went from the hall. The sun was almost gone now and the sky was layered with purple and yellow and crimson streamers. Lights had come on in headquarters, and shadows moved across the windows. The color sergeant and the bugler were

at the pole, and the bugle's sweet notes lifted as the flag was drawn in.

He watched, not really caring. The flag went up at dawn and came down at dusk. Except for the bugler, there was no ceremony. The pole stood now, bare and skeletal, fingering the sky, and the troopers walked away, side by side.

Tom built a cigarette and lit it with a thumb-flicked match, then paced toward headquarters. Smoke rolled past his high cheek bones, and he felt suddenly alien to the fort. He was a quarter Indian, and his blood called to him then as though he were a desert wolf brought up in captivity.

II

HALTING his stride, Tom swung his head toward the desert. He was on a rise and he could see far into the gathering dusk. Death lay out there, and none knew it more than he. Running Wolf and Gray Eagle and Ramirona could bring a thousand, aye, two thousand braves into battle within a few days! They would be armed, well armed, for raw gold bought much from traders within the mountains.

And in the mountains one Indian was worth five troopers, for he could blend and shift and dart and disappear, only to strike again and flee away. Not Major Brekhard's command, nor a dozen like it, could break those warriors before too many died.

Tom Longbow shivered. He had been to the East, had seen the cities and the countless people in them. He knew the Apaches did not have a chance. And yet, in a way, he admired them, for unlike the Sioux and the Pawnee and the Sac Fox and the Shawnee, throughout the country, they still fought valiantly against a force they could dent but never break. They were stupid and foolhardy, but somehow glorious in their stubbornness.

They were not truly his problem, though, for they did not accept him as one of them. They listened to him, for his words had never lied. They had always listened, and usually they had heeded. But now, roused by the three troublemakers, they not only might not listen but probably would not heed anything he said.

He swore suddenly and flipped the cigarette away. Sparks showered, then died, and the night came as suddenly as if a lamp had been blown out. The moon would not rise for an hour yet, and until then a man would grope his way across the earth.

A knot of men grew out of the darkness and went by. Sentries coming on, Lieutenant Ferris, officer of the day, marching them neatly. They went past and the echo of their steps died away. Far in the darkness, a coyote keened weirdly, and behind the stables a dog growled in sympathy.

Tom Longbow paused irresolutely, not knowing what to do. It was not his place to intrude, for he held no rank. He was a thirty-a-month scout, a hired man, and the army recognized only those who had taken the oath. And yet, because of the stories he had heard, because he had somehow sensed the temper which lay hidden in Major Brekhard, he knew he could not calmly turn away and let the man proceed unhampered.

Behind him, men were spilling from the mess hall, going toward their quarters. Laughter rang loudly, and an argument lifted against the backwash of sound.

Tom Longbow turned his head, sensing that someone had come silently to his side, and Matthers' quiet voice was ironic.

"You can't tell him anything, or so I've heard," he said. He touched the other's arm. "Come on and play a game of cards."

"It's worth the chance," Longbow said. "The other officers might need us to back them up."

Matthers spat. "If he gets tough with me, I'll up and leave," he declared. "I've met these men before, and we just don't get along." He spat again. "Come on, we'll see what's going on."

They went ahead, across the compound which was like cement now, its natural hardness packed even tighter by drilling feet and dancing hoofs. There was still the smell of spring in the air, tainted by smoke of the mess fires, but the early evening dampness was no more, vanished for the coming months of summer and fall.

The sentry challenged, coming stiffly to arms, and Matthers growled impatiently.

"It's us," he said, "Longbow and Matthers. Tell the major."

A moment later they were inside, strangely ill at ease, blinking against the glare of the three lamps. Captain Jurgens was there, pipe eternally in his mouth, and he winked in greeting, looking up from the table. Lieutenant Campbell was at Captain Mueller's side, and a swarthy little Mexican was pointing with a dirty forefinger at a line on a map.

"Ees about there," he said. "Jus' pas' Steenkeeng Well."

Major Brekhard was lighting a cheroot at the neck of a lamp, and he straightened, squinting against the smoke, his gray hair almost white in the lamplight. The room was hot, and perspiration marked the others, but he was as immaculate as if he had just bathed and dressed.

He swung his gaze toward the two scouts, staring briefly, then ignored them.

"What do you think, Captain?" he said to Jurgens.

Captain Jurgens shrugged. "It's tough country," he said. "They could fight us to a standstill."

The major's lips tightened. "Is that advice or a comment?" he snapped.

Captain Jurgens fingered his pipe. "Comment, sir," he said.

"It's a full day's march," Mueller volunteered. "There's little water."

MAJOR BREKHARD spat smoke, then dropped into his chair. His eyes ran over the men, and the contempt in them was thinly veiled.

"Gentlemen," he said softly, "we've talked for thirty minutes, and I've yet to hear a concrete suggestion." His fingers brushed the map. "I'm new here, that I admit, but I neither understand nor approve of the reluctance all of you have for closing with this problem." His fingers clenched. "Would any of you care to explain?"

Captain Jurgens cleared his throat. Mueller shifted uneasily. The lieutenant was suddenly very busy tracing a route on the map.

"Well," Major Brekhard snapped impatiently.

"Sir," Captain Jurgens said, "in that country we'd attack as infantry, and we're no real match for those Apaches, fighting that way. We've twelve troops, six hundred men, and a third must stay here. They'll match us man for man."

"Man for man!" A muscle grew taut in the major's cheek. "Dirty stinking savages, and you won't meet them man to man! Captain, there isn't a soldier living who couldn't whip ten of those red heathen!"

Tom Longbow felt the heat rising to his face, and a tremor lay in his legs. It was not so much the words, but the tone, which touched his senses with brutal fingers. Yet he said nothing, waiting this out, as he had other things.

"Begging your pardon, Major," Captain Mueller said heavily, "but being new here, you've made a slight mistake. In the mountains, fighting as they do, there isn't an Indian who can't whip ten troopers." He swung about. "I think the scouts will bear me out."

The major's chair creaked. His eyes were slitted, anger curling behind the lids.

"Well?" he asked.

Matthers shrugged. "Fight another man's way and the advantage is his," he admitted.

"And you?" the major asked Tom Longbow.

Longbow nodded slightly. "The Apaches know the country. They can fight until all ammunition is gone. Man for man, they'll whip the troops."

Major Brekhard flicked ashes. "You're Indian?" he asked.

"Yes, sir." Tom Longbow felt the stiffness in his knees. Never had his loyalty been questioned on that basis.

"What tribe?"

"Apache."

Anger came to Matthers, and he took a slow step forward. "You're getting a bit personal, aren't you, Major!" he said thinly. "We don't ask what your race is. We just figure you've a job to do."

For one moment hate lay in the room. The major came halfway out of his chair, whiteness driving all color from his face. His mustache and chin whiskers were shot with gray, but now they were black against his skin.

"Forget it, Matthers," Tom Longbow said then. "The major was just asking a question."

But the words could not erase the hurt and anger from him, and he knew then this soldier was one he could never like.

"Longbow," Major Brekhard said, "I meant no offense." But his hand trembled as he sat again and lifted the cigar to his lips.

Tension eased. Trujillo smiled about the room, but found no answer. Captain Mueller scratched his chin, and the lieutenant coughed loudly, clearing his throat. Captain Jurgens was impassive.

The major licked his lips. "All right," he said, "let me hear suggestions?"

Jurgens nodded, as though he had reached a decision. "Sir," he said, "a talk might be the thing. Running Wolf and the others are not fools. They know the odds they face if we bring in more troops. I think they'll talk, for it will be to their advantage. Send a parley patrol out and let them talk. Maybe words can do what guns might have trouble in doing."

"Captain Mueller?" the major said, nodding in his direction.

Mueller nodded. "Jurgens is right, sir," he said. "I don't think the Indians will move until they are provoked. The leaders will be waiting until they get every recruit and rifle they can. Running Wolf and Gray Eagle and Ramirona will talk until then, and maybe they can be bought off, one way or another."

Brekhard crushed out his cigar. "And if we wait, we'll face five times as many savages."

"Yes, sir." Captain Jurgens answered. "That is, if a parley fails."

"And you think they'll listen to a patrol?"

"I think so, sir. Ostensibly, they are meeting for worship. They won't start anything until Running Wolf gives the order."

Major Brekhard's fingers became still. "Take a patrol out, Captain," he said to Jurgens. "Understand, I am not wholly in approval of this action, but my judgment may be wrong."

"Yes, sir." Captain Jurgens swung to Trujillo. "You'll go along for guide."

"*Si, senor*," the little Mexican agreed.

And Tom Longbow, standing unnoticed now near the door, felt an easing of the tension in him. The major was no fool, martinet though he was. He was new to these lands and he realized it, and so for the moment he would take the advice of others.

"That's all, gentlemen," Major Brekhard said. "Report to me, Captain, when you are ready to leave."

"Yes, sir," the captain answered.

Later, with the notes of "Taps" dying away in melancholy strain, Tom Longbow lay sleepless on his bunk. He could hear the patrol on the parade ground, a horse nickering in protest, Captain Jurgens' voice lifting harshly. The vibration of hoofs on hard ground came, and then the sound died and the patrol was gone, and after a time Tom Longbow slept.

ON THE fifth day Captain Jurgens' patrol returned. Tension had mounted in the fort, and the major was a stalking cat, snarling at everybody. Forty-eight hours had been the limit given for the mission, and when the extra hours and days slid past without its return, the troopers began to talk and the officers went about tight-lipped and expressionless.

Then a roving patrol brought in Jurgens' men, and the return was a parade, humiliating and bitter in its insolence. Six men had gone out, but only five had returned, the smiling little Trujillo not among them.

They came into the fort, riding double behind other troopers. Their faces were grim and tired, lined with alkali dust, the anger in them so vicious that no watcher called out greeting. They were naked—naked, that is, except for the skirts of squaws, and their legs and rear quarters had been painted and stained the bright yellow of cowardice.

Shame lay in them, and the desire for revenge, and when they had disappeared into headquarters, the troopers cornered the rescuing patrol and milked them of information.

"Turned on them," one man explained. "Took their clothes and made them run a gauntlet. Trujillo made a break for a rifle, and a lance speared him like a fish. Four braves carried him about until he died, two on each end of the lance, him squirming and praying and crying his hate. Then the red devils sent the patrol back to the fort, dressed in squaws' skirts."

Tom Longbow heard the words and sickness ate at his heart. He went at a run toward headquarters, and went past the guard and into the major's office without trouble.

The major was there, his face as flinty and bony as though no blood lay in the flesh. The surgeon was working over the patrol, ministering to cuts and bruises and burned and swollen feet.

"They've asked for it," the major was

saying, "and, by heaven, we'll give it to them! I want eight companies mounted and prepared to march within thirty minutes."

"Sir?" Captain Jurgens said, and winced at the cleaning of the rock cuts in his feet. "Running Wolf and Gray Eagle and Ramirona weren't there. The braves did this to us."

"So?" the major thundered.

"There are five hundred braves in that encampment and at least three hundred women and children. We haven't a ghost of a chance without help."

Major Brekhard's fist pounded on the table. "And you expect me to let those savages get away with this! Captain, this thing is a lot bigger than any of us. If those Apaches get away with this, we will have lost every bit of prestige we've gained in the past!"

Tom Longbow broke in then. He had no business in the conversation, for technically he was a civilian. But he saw the winds of wrath stirring, blinding reason, and he knew he had no choice.

"Let me go alone, Major," he said, coming forward to the desk. "Running Wolf is no fool. He will realize that what has been done is in some ways more serious than the loss of a fight." He saw the hardness in the major's face and a cold fist knotted in his stomach. "Twenty-four hours is all I need," he finished. "I know short-cuts a single man can take, coming and going."

"Longbow," Major Brekhard said, "I wouldn't trust you as far as I could throw you! You're Indian, no matter what you call yourself. I doubt your loyalty to the United States, and I don't propose letting you ride to warn Running Wolf of what I plan."

Tom Longbow straightened, and he was all Apache then.

"Major," he said, "you overreach yourself. My record stands!" A slight tinge of contempt came to his voice. "What do you know of Indian fighting? What do you know of anything in this country? You're a spit-and-polish soldier, and as bull-headed as a mule!"

"That man's under arrest!" Major Brekhard choked out. "Get him out of here!"

Tom Longbow backed a step. The movement was instinctive, and it ranged him at the side of Christiansen and Matthers. Lieutenant Campbell made as though to draw his pistol, then his hand went still. The major's face flamed.

"Is everybody deaf?" he demanded flatly.

Christiansen spat at a gleaming cuspidor. "Major," he said, "you're a bit too high-handed. You can't arrest a civilian, not just for talking."

III

BREKHARD leaned forward, palms flat on the desk. He was trembling and his eyes were slitted with his anger. Too long had he commanded, too many men had jumped to do his bidding. And that knowledge, dim as it was as well as the fact that Longbow's defiance was justified, almost broke the will which held him in check.

"As commander here," he said, "soldier and civilian alike are under my jurisdiction."

"Major," Captain Jurgens broke in, and the very calmness of his tone was shocking in the moment's stress, "Major, let Longbow talk to Running Wolf. Twenty-four hours isn't long to wait. Meanwhile, we'll have that much more time for those reinforcements to come along."

The major was whipped, then. Never had he come to such a point as this. He faced a solid wall of opinion and it could not be breached. He was post commandant, and yet his word did not carry as it should. He shook his head as though to clear his mind, and his hot gaze swept the room.

"Gentlemen, I shall remember all of this," he said. "Longbow, you have just twenty hours. We march at sunup tomorrow."

"Yes, sir," Tom Longbow said evenly, and turned and left the room.

He paused a moment in the early morning sunlight, and then he was running, racing toward the stables where his paint was stabled in a far stall. Dust rose and hung in the air as his moccasins spurned the earth.

* * * * *

It was late afternoon. The paint picked its way over the rubble of the faint path, and Tom Longbow lifted his right leg over the saddle-horn, resting his weariness. Behind lay hours of fast riding, fast riding and impatient breathing spells. The canteen was half empty,

and the sun had heated the silver butt mounting of his rifle until it was uncomfortable to the touch.

A quarter mile ahead lay the encampment, and he was conscious of the fact that breech-clouted Indians had watched him for the past hour from the heights. He rode slowly. Ahead, Apache men and women began to gather, waiting his approach.

He straightened in the saddle, dropping his leg, and rode onward, his face as impassive as an Indian of full blood. A dog yapped and the pony shied. Longbow straightened it with a twitch of the reins, forcing it through the path which opened ahead and ended at the lodge of Running Wolf.

A few squaws spat, and the children cried epithets. But the warriors were silent, measuring this man, some fingering weapons as though waiting for the inevitable.

Longbow stopped the paint before the lodge, looking down. Running Wolf was there, he and Gray Eagle and Ramirona. They watched silently as he slid to the ground.

"I come in peace," Tom Longbow said. "I bring a message from the white soldiers' chief."

Ramirona spat, dark eyes contemptuous. He was dressed as a white man, except for the single plume in his wiry hair. Gray Eagle made no movement. Running Wolf twisted his scarred face in speech.

"We will talk," he said.

They entered the lodge, and outside a great hum of whispering and speech arose, questioning and angry, bragging and conciliatory. Tom Longbow heard and perspiration glistened on his dark face.

Running Wolf squatted before the dead fire ashes, and Ramirona and Gray Eagle dropped at his sides. Longbow squatted on his heels, waiting, trying to think like those he faced.

"We will listen," Running Wolf said.

"It is a bad thing your braves have done, this staining yellow of the whites and sending them back afoot," Tom Longbow said evenly. "No man of stomach can take such a thing. You have sowed a storm, and the winds are sweeping closer."

Ramirona laughed softly. "Are you a medicine man, that you can foretell storms?" he asked.

LONGBOW ignored the breed, dark eyes intent on Running Wolf's twisted, bitter face. The lodge stank of sweat and dung, of the fire and the odor of cooking long dead. No breeze stirred, and sweat rolled along his cheeks.

"The white men are as leaves in a forest," he said. "Burn one tree and another springs up. You, Gray Eagle, and you, Running Wolf, have fought the soldiers and know I speak the truth. You know how many soldiers are at the fort, and I tell you truly that ten times that number will be here within a moon, if you go to battle. Even you, here in the mountains, cannot stand against so many."

Running Wolf stretched one arm, silencing Longbow. His body was greased, and his ribs were prominent. He was not young, but he was lean and hard and incredibly dangerous.

"The white men have lied," he said. "They have stolen all we have, land and goods. They cheat us with their agents. They harry us from land to land, from rock to rock, until we can retreat no farther." His face twisted brutally. "We cannot win forever, that we know. But we can fight, and fight for so long that good terms must be made to us. Many shall die, but those left alive shall gain because of death. Do not take us for fools, Longbow, for we know what we are doing."

Gray Eagle nodded. "We can fight for months," he said. "We can live off the land and fight while doing so. We can retreat into Mexico, if need be, or go north or any direction. We are now a conquered people, in numbers if not in spirit. But we shall fight until such time as our rights are understood and promises kept. You may tell the white soldier chief that."

Tom Longbow nodded. "I understand," he said, "and yet I do not understand. Do your braves know what lies in your minds? Do they know they cannot stand against such weapons as the soldiers bring, such weapons as the Gatling gun which fires more bullets in a minute than you have men in this camp? Do they understand that many will die in a futile fight which they can never win?"

Ramirona laughed. "We think for them, Longbow," he said. "Without us, they are like sheep. We think for them and they do our bidding. And"—his tone

was malevolent—"we shall tell them to fight."

Tom Longbow shook his head. "I bring a message," he said, "from Major Brekhard, the white soldier chief. He would meet with you and discuss differences. If your demands are just, they will be met and lives will be saved."

Ramirona caught up ashes and dribbled them from his fingers in contempt and insult. "You speak with a forked tongue, Longbow," he said. "You, like I, are not full Apache, but you forget the Indian and walk with the whites. You lie as they do."

Longbow drew a slow breath. Running Wolf and Gray Eagle watched, and Ramirona's hatred was like a blow in the face.

"I do not explain my actions," Tom Longbow said then. "I go where I please. But I tell you this. Talk with the white chief, tell him what is in your mind. He is powerful and just and will see that your words are heeded."

"And if we do not talk?"

"War—which you cannot win. Squaws will weep and children cry for their fathers."

Running Wolf shook his head slowly. "This smells of a trap," he said, "and that I do not like."

"I swear it is no trap," Tom Longbow said earnestly. He swallowed. "I bring this further message. Major Brekhard and two other soldiers will be at Stinking Well at sundown tomorrow. He asks you to smoke a pipe and make peace talk there with him. You shall meet alone, and if peace does not come from the talks, then each of you will go your separate ways."

"You take us for fools!" Ramirona sneered.

"You speak the truth?" Gray Eagle broke in.

"By my life, I swear it!" Tom Longbow said. "By my life, I swear this to be no trap! There will be peace talk, as I have said."

He had given his oath then, and no Apache oath was greater. Many warriors had died because of that oath. For failing, they had returned and submitted themselves to death so that their honor might be unstained.

RUNNING WOLF looked from man to man. Gray Eagle made no move. Ramirona hesitated, then shrugged in defeat. Running Wolf nodded, as though to himself.

"By your oath we shall be at Stinking Well at sundown tomorrow. We shall come alone, as must the white chief and his two soldiers. If nothing is gained from the talk, then nothing but time is lost. If the white chief speaks with a straight tongue, then lives shall be saved and justice done." He stood. "This talk is ended."

Minutes later, Tom Longbow reined in for a last look at the camp. Smoke rose palely into the sky, and the sun was almost down. A dog barked, and people moved about. High on the cliffs, the lookouts stood immobile, last rays of sunlight glittering on the rifles in their arms.

Longbow watched for a moment, then he kneed the horse ahead.

Shadows were fading and stretching in the early morning light when Longbow reached the fort. He walked the paint, and it limped gingerly, one hoof having been split by an upthrust splinter of rock. There was activity in the fort, and his eyes narrowed at seeing it.

A sentry challenged and then passed him, and he racked his horse at the stable, unsaddling. Then he went at a half run toward headquarters.

The train was being made ready, white canvas gleaming in the morning light, mules fighting the harnesses laid across their backs. Sutlers swore and troopers blinked away sleep. McClellan saddles were being fitted, blanket rolls and overcoats and other gear lashed into place on pommels and cantles. Everywhere was confusion, but this was planned confusion, and order was coming swiftly.

Longbow went through the open door of headquarters, saluting without conscious thought as he halted before the major's desk. A dozen officers were in the close-packed room, and their heads swung in amazement at the scouts' abrupt entrance.

"Longbow reporting, sir," he said.

"Well?" Major Brekhard said, and glanced at the Boston clock on the file case.

"I parleyed with them," Longbow said. "They aren't quite so sure of themselves as they would have you believe. But they will make peace talk with you and two other officers at Stinking Well at sundown."

Major Brekhard's face was expressionless. "They will be alone?"

"Yes, sir, and they expect you to be the same."

"Good!" The major swung his head. "Gentlemen, you have your orders. We ride in ten minutes."

Tom Longbow frowned. "But sir, this changes everything. A peace talk will solve whatever—"

"Gentlemen, good-day," the major said.

"But major—" Longbow started to protest.

"Sergeant!" Major Brekhard's voice lifted, and the noncom came upright from his desk.

"Yes, sir," he said woodenly.

"This Indian is under arrest. Confine him to the guardhouse. He is not to be released until I order otherwise!"

Tom Longbow stiffened, hand going to the knife scabbarded at his waist.

"I demand an explanation," he said tensely.

Major Brekhard leaned forward. "Longbow, I'm no fool, even if this country is new to me. I catered to you because I thought it might be best." He laughed softly. "I know, as well as you, that you've prepared a trap for me with your cousin. All right, I'll step into that trap—but I'll take four hundred men with me. Once and for all, we'll break those Apaches!"

"Sir, I gave my word," Tom said desperately. "I swore on my life that there would be no trickery!"

"Your word, not mine," Major Brekhard snapped. "Sergeant, do your duty."

IV

TOM LONGBOW made a last desperate effort to penetrate the foolhardiness of this man. His words were tight, the muscles aching in his jaw.

"Major Brekhard," he said earnestly, "I spoke in your name. You cannot break faith with those Indians. You'll march your troops to certain death. I gave my oath—"

"An Indian's oath!" Brekhard said in vast contempt. "Sergeant!"

"Yes, sir!" the sergeant answered.

Longbow hesitated. He saw the understanding and compassion in the eyes of several officers. But they were soldiers and they took orders, and there was nothing they could do. He glanced once more at the major's rocky face, and then he turned, half-stumbling through the doorway, the sergeant pacing at his back, side arm cleared.

He marched across the ground and into the guardhouse, and the door closed behind him, a lock snicking shut with brittle sound.

"Sorry, Tom," the sergeant said, and then he was running toward headquarters.

Bugles sounded, bright and clear. Horses stilled in line, and then men mounted as one, settling. Campaign hats were jammed tightly, and yellow bandannas were bright against dark blouses. Carbines were back-slung and revolvers hugged heavy thighs. Officers and men waited, yellow-striped breeches and polished boots neat in the sunlight. A horse nickered and a mule brayed.

An army waited.

Mounted, kepi at a purposeful angle, Major Brekhard rode for momentary inspection. Then the brief high notes of the bugles rose again and the column moved out. Dust began to rise.

Women waved good-by, and the remaining soldiers called cries at the marching army. Scouts were already ahead, and behind moved the infantry. Then came the wagon train and the cavalry. The regimental band was playing and the lilting strains picked up the beat. The men moved out, going away from the music.

Tom Longbow watched, and he knew that men already dead were marching to their graves. Four hundred men they were, four hundred leather-tough fighting men. They took their orders in stride, though, and only the raw recruits did not realize that ahead lay death in the purple mountains.

He turned from the window and dropped to the bunk. He could hear the last bugle notes fading, and the band was still now, the army gone. The fort was quiet, as though nothing had happened.

Outside, the guard paced his post, wheeling and breaking and coming about, sweat already staining his tunic.

Tom Longbow swore tightly, fumbling for tobacco and paper. He rolled a cigarette and lit it, then lay back on the bunk and watched the smoke drift toward the ceiling. A spider waited patiently in its web, and ever closer buzzed

two flies. The spider could wait; it was but a matter of time.

An hour passed, and a second drifted by. Cigarette stubs piled on the floor, and the heat was bolder, sucking all coolness from the adobe guardhouse. The army would be miles away by now, scouts and patrols fanned out, the column flowing on, sweat-soaked and chafing.

Longbow waited. There was a patience in him which had stood him well before. He lay on the bunk, hearing the muted sounds of the fort, the hoarse cries of the corporal browbeating the recruits, the excited yells of the children at the corral as the Callaghan twins worked their pony with a long rope. Plan after plan came and was rejected, and at last he lay motionless, not thinking, waiting like a coyote before a prairie-dog hole.

Mess call sounded, notes bright and sharp. Longbow rose then, standing at the barred window, staring out. The guard flashed a quick glance, then paced on, spine straight, chin up.

Tom Longbow shivered, knowing now what must be done. Decision had come, and the growing had been hard. Betrayal lay there, and the thought was ugly. His brown face was seamed and weathered, but it gave no clue to his thoughts.

A TRAY in his hands, the cook's helper came across the grounds. He nodded at the guard. The guard propped his rifle against the wall and fumbled for the key which would open the lock. He was pushing open the door when Tom Longbow jerked on it, throwing him off balance.

Longbow struck, not with clenched fist but with the edge of his hand. The guard dropped senseless, half in, half out of the doorway. Reaching, spinning the helper aside, Longbow reached the rifle.

"In," he said flatly, and the helper went past, still holding the tray, his face white and strained. Longbow dragged the guard inside.

"Five minutes," Tom Longbow said grimly. "Five minutes I intend to have! After that, yell like the devil, for all I care."

He saw agreement in the man's face and he went through the door, closing it and snapping the lock shut through the heavy hasp. He laid the rifle aside and went across the grounds toward the stable, tightness in him now, his breath hot, blood pounding at his temples. A few soldiers stared incuriously, then ignored him, intent on reaching the mess hall.

Longbow sighed, feeling the shadows of the stable about him now. He caught up his saddle from where it was racked on a pole and went along the stalls. His paint was lame, and so he took Buckskin, Captain Jurgen's second mount. It nuzzled his arm, then took the saddle, grunting as he pulled the girth tight.

He mounted at the stable door, and the horse was running before they were ten yards out. Behind, in the guardhouse, men began to yell, and the sentry's bullet keened like a banshee as it cut past him and ricocheted from the flinty ground.

He rode low in the saddle, bending forward, and the wind whipped his hat, knocking it back, the string choking his throat. He hand-guided the yellow horse, ignoring the reins, and the horse lengthened out, running like a frightened jackrabbit.

A second shot echoed, but the bullet made no sound. And then he was out of range. He straightened a bit in the saddle, looking back. He had a few minutes' start; only a bullet, or the maiming of Buckskin, could stop him now.

Tension eased from him as he gave the horse its head. Its pace slackened, but still it made speed. He had no fear of capture. He cut to the south, taking a way the army could not go, but which a single horseman could make at double time. He settled to the saddle, wondering if the yellow horse could stand the punishing gait he would keep for hours.

Straight overhead, the sun was a molten ball of copper, and Tom fitted his campaign hat against its fiery rays, wishing he had brought a canteen for the horse, if not for himself.

The hours slid past. The horse was gaunted now, blowing hard, yet Longbow begrudged every rest, every precious minute when the horse must blow for a time. Then sun had slid down, until now red was streaking the sky in the coming sunset. The mountains were almost at hand, not purple now but brown and green and icy gray. Some were snow-topped, and Longbow wished absently some of its chill could touch him.

He had passed the army somewhere, that he knew, but sight of it had been

denied, for he had circled, cutting into secret arroyos he knew, not wanting to be seen by anybody. He was close to Stinking Well, and he wondered if Running Wolf and Gray Eagle and Ramirona had already arrived at the rendezvous.

Buckskin's breathing was easier now, and Tom mounted again. But the horse had run its course and the eagerness was gone from it. It ran but reluctantly, and only quick reining saved it again and again from a stumbling fall.

Coolness was coming, sweeping down from the mountains. Night was spreading long shadows and the sky was burning with red and yellow flames. Only minutes now until full darkness, and then an hour before the moon would ride the heaven and paint everything with silver.

Tom Longbow cut to his right, swinging through a notch. Light was almost gone, and he could feel nerves straining, tendril-like, as he waited for the burst of shots which would mark a peace talk betrayed.

But there was only the sound of his horse going through the dimness.

HE SMELLED the sulphur after a time, like the odor of rotten eggs which had broken and lain too long in the sun. He was close to Stinking Well now, close to the water which had given it its name.

Buckskin smelled the water and his head came up, and he surged forward with renewed strength.

Tom Longbow topped a short rise. Ahead he saw the gleam of a dying fire. It was barely a hand's-breadth in width, and it sparked fretfully in the breeze. He could see the shadows which were the three Apaches, and exultation touched him that he had arrived in time.

He felt no surprise that he had not been stopped by Apache outposts. Indians were strange and cunning and sometimes vicious, but they respected a truce, and he had given his word that a peace pipe would be smoked. They did not trust the white men, but custom was inviolate and so they had come alone as promised.

He went ahead, forcing the horse over the ridge and down the shale toward the fire. He saw the stir of movement as the Indians looked around, and then he was slipping from his saddle and the horse was drinking at the stream with great, slobbering breaths.

Waiting only for a moment, Tom pulled Buckskin away, not wanting him to founder. He walked the horse toward the almost-dead fire, and a chill lay in his heart.

"Where are the whites?" Ramirona asked sharply. "Why are you alone."

Tom Longbow swallowed. Running Wolf was watching, ceremonial feather in his hair, a gaudy blanket over one shoulder. His chest was bare and had been striped with paint by the medicine man. He cradled a rifle, which was a permitted thing, even when making peace talk.

"Where is the white chief?" Gray Eagle asked, and faint alarm was in his tone.

Tom Longbow stood, not squatting as the others were, and his tongue licked at parched lips for a moment.

"I bring you a warning," he said at last. "I carried your promise to meet to the white chief, but he ignored the words. Even now, he must be close, with hundreds of soldiers!"

Ramirona leaped to his feet, and his rifle whirled about, centering on Longbow's middle.

"A trap!" he cried. "I swear I knew it!"

Tom Longbow did not flinch. "It was not meant as such," he said. "I spoke what I thought were true words."

He could feel the hatred of the man, and his stomach muscles went tight against the shock of the coming bullet. The rifle lifted.

"Hold!" Running Wolf said. His eyes were still on Tom Longbow. "Why have you come to warn us?" he finished.

"I gave my oath," Tom Longbow said simply. His head jerked in anger. "There is no time for talk. I've ridden fast, but I cannot have arrived much sooner than the troops. Get away!"

He whirled, hand pointing toward the ridges.

"They will be there any moment!" he cried.

And as though his hand wave had been a signal, men were on the ridge, rifles in their hands. Even at the distance, Tom Longbow recognized the major's straight stance, Captain Jurgen's relaxed body.

"Running Wolf, Gray Eagle, Ramirona," a bull-like voice hailed, echoed

dancing from rock to rock, "surrender yourself! You are completely surrounded! To fight is useless! You have two minutes!"

Gray Eagle whirled, staring about. He had fought battles before. Running Wolf clutched his rifle tightly in both hands Only Ramirona did not move, and muscles were ridging in his hand.

"Betrayal!" he said. "You betrayed your people!"

"Get away!" Longbow cried. "Get away! Those troopers aren't mountain men. You can get away."

"And you?" Running Wolf asked softly.

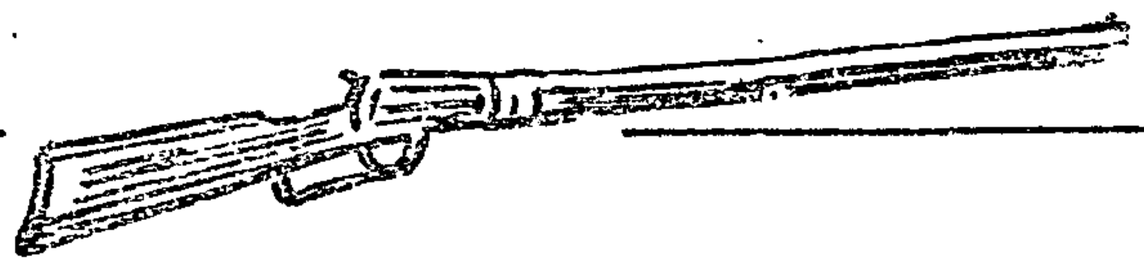
The call came again from the trooper, and now impatience was in the tone.

Echoes hammered back and forth, and a trooper bent at the middle and then was gone.

The shot was a signal. Flames grew in tiny spots overhead, and the lash of ricocheting bullets was nasty and deadly. Guns roared, sound magnified by the innumerable canyons, and now Stinking Well was indeed a trap from which there could be no escape.

"Back!" Running Wolf cried, and the three Apaches faded into the rocks.

One second Tom Longbow waited. One eternity in which his thoughts whirled and coalesced. He could still ride, trusting to the dimness to escape. Behind, the Indians' rifles began their deadly song, and the sound was a flat



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"One minute, and then we fire! Don't be fools, for you haven't a chance! Surrender with honor!"

"With honor!" Ramirona said bitterly, and his eyes swung to the cliff. "What do they know of honor?"

"Get out, or surrender," Tom Longbow pleaded, sweat standing thick on his dusty face. "You'll die here like rats in a corn pit."

Running Wolf shook his head then. "We do neither," he said clearly. "The gods have placed us here, and I've a mind we shall never leave." He nodded at the yellow horse. "Ride away," he finished. "We believe you thought you spoke words of truth. Ride away, for this battle is not yours."

V

IMPASSIVELY, as though he shot at some fair target, Running Wolf lifted his rifle, sighted, and pulled the trigger. obbligato to the roar overhead.

Then Tom Longbow reached up and drew the silver-mounted rifle from his saddle-boot. Dodging, whirling about, he left the horse and it fled, whinnying in fear, sparks rising from iron shoes on flinty rocks.

Whether a minute, a day, a month, a battle is scored only in success or victory. And this was no battle, nor yet an engagement. It was but a flurry in the campaigns. Four men stood against four hundred and the outcome could have but one direction.

Bullets smeared lead on the bare rocks, whipped froth from the waters of Stinking Well, and sought out the victims one by one. A pattern of shots was laid, a blanket through which nothing could escape. Men fired at nothing and hit something. Darkness had fallen, and the rocky pocket was a basket into which death was poured at vicious speed.

They died one by one, those four, and

on the ridges only the first trooper was struck by flying lead. Far away, Apaches heard the firing and men knew they had been betrayed, and women began to wail as though they knew already their leaders were gone.

And when at last the firing ceased, there was silence, brooding and intense, terrible in its loneliness.

Troopers came down, cautiously and carefully, rifles ready. They searched and found the things for which they sought, and their cries brought the major and his aides down the shale sides to where the bodies lay.

"Running Wolf," Captain Jurgens said over the first body, letting the rays of his bull's-eye lantern flood the Indian. "Gray Eagle," he said over the second. "Ramirona," he uttered over the third.

Major Brekhard rubbed his hands together and exultation was in his eyes. Only a short time had he had this command and now this thing was done, the leaders dead.

"Bring the bodies," he ordered. "We'll make camp now and attack in the morning."

"And Longbow, sir?" Captain Jurgens queried, no surprise in his voice.

"Longbow, but he's locked—"

Major Brekhard came about the rock and stood staring down at Tom Longbow in the dust.

Tom lay as he had fallen, toppled sideways from his sitting position. His rifle still lay across his body, and in the sand before him was a picture, drawn with his forefingers, cabalistic and strange, marred only by the seepage of his blood across one edge.

"So I was right!" Major Brekhard said, and his triumphant voice lashed at his officers. "He broke out and came to warn these others. I told you these savages can't be trusted!"

"Yes, sir," Captain Jurgens said woodenly, and bent to retrieve the rifle.

The major's boot toe touched the sand markings.

"What is that?" he asked.

"It's part of a death rite, sir," Captain Jurgens said quietly.

"Stinking heathen!" Major Brekhard growled. "Oh, well, take him along, too. He fought against us, like the others, but we can't leave him here." He turned about. "There will be a conference in one hour, gentlemen," he finished. "We will march at dawn, and this time no savage traitor will give warning."

"Sir?" Captain Jurgens said softly.

"Well, what is it?"

"This, sir."

MAJOR BREKHARD looked and bent to smell of the bore of the carbine. He heard the sigh go about his men, and a whiteness came to his face. He straightened, and he saw himself mirrored in every eye as he had never seen himself before. He was a brave man, and yet fear touched him then.

"He spoke in your name, sir. He gave his life oath," Captain Jurgens said evenly.

The major backed a full pace. He saw his officers, and on the ridges four hundred men waited his command. Washington would cite him for this action, and a full battle would break the Apaches forever. He could do by force of arms what no officer had ever accomplished before.

The light of the lantern was on Tom Longbow on the ground, his dark face strangely calm now, all lines erased. He had died fast, two bullets converging and meeting in his chest. But before he had died he had made his peace with himself.

Major Brekhard was still, and he was remembering many things, his ambitions, his hopes, his anger at assignment to the fort. He was remembering Tom Longbow, dark and hard, and the manner in which the man had faced him. He knew then the breed had measured up and he himself had failed, and the knowledge was galling and humbling and richly deserved.

"Captain," he said, and his voice was strangely unsure, "is there any chance —now, I mean—of still making talk with the Indians?"

Captain Jurgens watched troopers lifting the bodies of the murdered men. There was no condemnation in his face or voice, for he had seen other men face this land and emerge the better.

"It's possible," he said. "They will be disorganized by their leaders' deaths." He nodded. "I'll take a troop in and try to talk."

"All right," Major Brekhard said. "But I shall go along, this time."

* * * * *

And so it is that the War Department keeps a yellowed file of the affair at

Stinking Well. History books tell the story, too, and always the white soldiers were the heroes. Nothing is to be gained by telling otherwise, for that story lies long in the past.

Brekhard is gone now, as is Jurgens and Mueller and the rest. The Apaches ride no more, for the deaths of Running Wolf and Gray Eagle and Ramirona broke their nation forever, except for a few sporadic outbursts which almost died aborning.

The United States consolidated its Western empire, and the Indians lost theirs. A nation died at the end of another's birth. Gone are the gallant men who rode the plains and fought in the mountains. Gone are the campaign hats and the flashing sabers and daring which was a flag of battle.

In later years, when Major Brekhard was two ranks higher and his hair was snow-white—in those later years when he talked of the old campaigns and, like all troopers, complained of the milksops the army now recruited, he spoke little of Stinking Well.

It was the end of one life for him and the beginning of another. He learned compassion and understanding of other men. He learned the true meaning of honor, be it in red man or black or yellow or white. He learned something from the twisted, bullet-shattered body of a half-breed scout who had died at the sides of men whose blood was the same as his.

He was white and he was red, and he was true to each as far as he was able. His patience and his daring and his laughter were known things, and only once had his loyalty been challenged, and then by Major Brekhard.

He had died as he had planned, and the major learned then that a man's word is never given lightly. Longbow had spoken for a man who had lied, and yet he had kept his oath.

AND SO it was, in those passing years, that when Major Brekhard had a decision to make, he thought of Tom Longbow and made it as though he had asked the dead man a question and received an answer. He was a better man and soldier for that, and he knew the truth about a good many things.

And when visitors to his office looked at a silver-mounted carbine which hung on the wall, he would touch it with gentle fingers, and his voice was grave as he answered their questions.

"It belonged to a man I once knew," he would explain. "I think we might have been friends, had he lived. But he died in the Indian campaigns." He would always straighten then, and his voice would boom. "He died with the rifle in his arms, facing the Fifth. He died with dignity and with honor. He was a brave man."

He would explain no further, no matter what was asked. His fingers would touch the barrel and breech, which he kept clean and oiled. It was unloaded, of course, and never would it be fired again.

It was unloaded and unfired, as it had been the night when Tom Longbow had kept his faith with three Apache renegades. He had kept his oath with them, and yet he had not betrayed the troops. He had maintained his honor and his allegiance, and so had passed on.

"To you," the major sometimes drank a toast to an empty room. And perhaps it was his imagination, but still he liked to think that an echo came back in the wail of wind.

"To us," the echo whispered, and the major was content.

Message from Garcia

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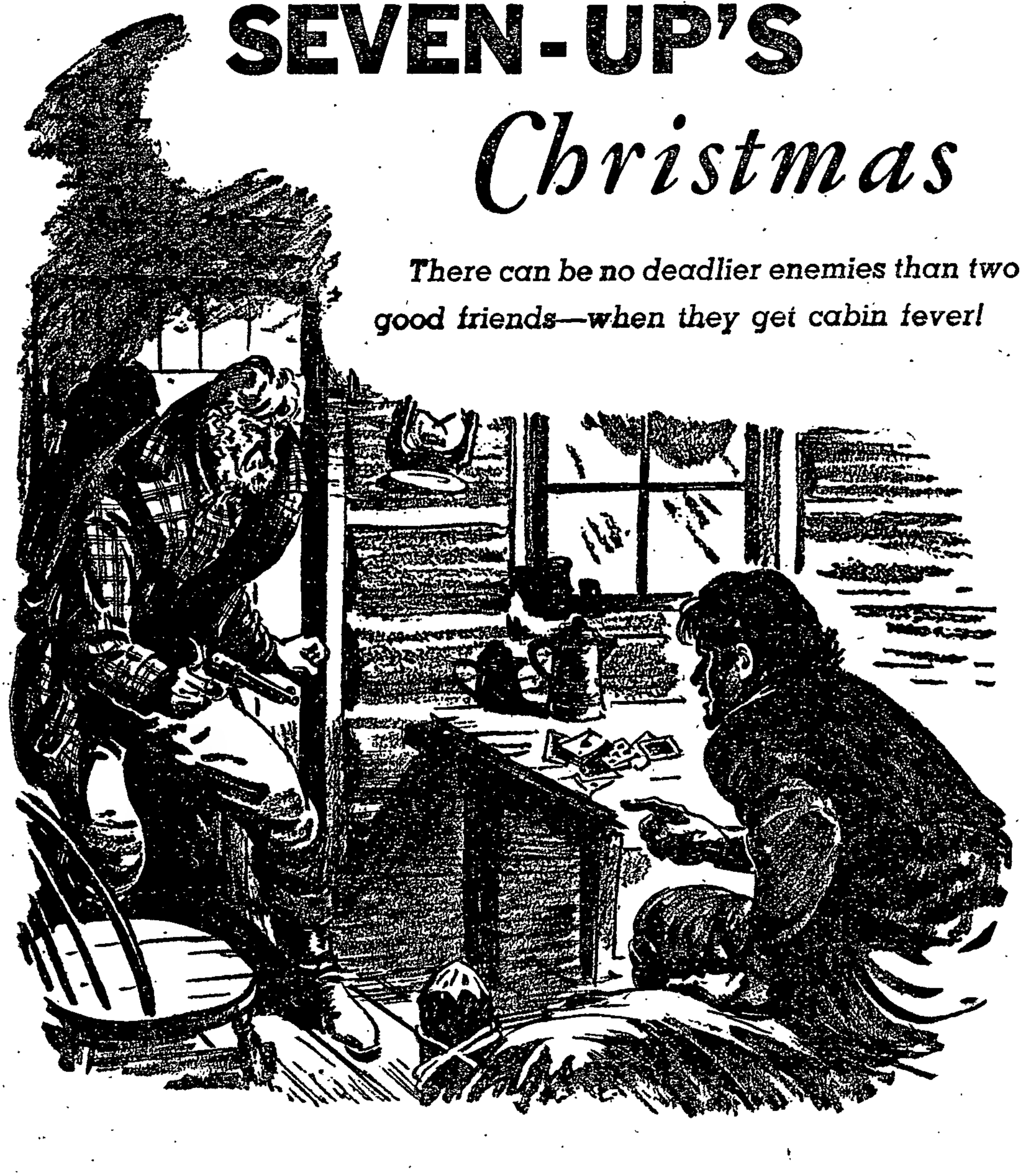
SEVEN-UP'S *Christmas*

There can be no deadlier enemies than two good friends—when they get cabin fever!



by CHARLES ALDEN SELTZER

OLD Seven-Up came to the door of his dugout as Laskar rode up.

"So you got here, did you?" he said, with a wide grin. "Saw you hittin' the breeze for town day afore yesterday and figgered you'd be back about now."

He came out to pull the saddle from Laskar's pony while the latter removed the bridle and staked the animal out in the lee of the dugout wall.

"Got some frijoles in the pot for you. Been bubbling right smart since sundown."

Laskar felt his soul expand as he fol-

lowed the old man into the dugout. Hot frijoles and soda biscuits, done to a turn in Seven-Up's dutch ovens, was infinitely preferable to cold bacon and canned tomatoes on the wind-swept November prairie forty miles from home.

Which was one reason why Laskar always timed himself to stop off at the dugout on his way back from town. The other reason was seven-up.

This simple card game was Seven-Up's joy and delight. And when an old-timer like Seven-Up, who was sixty-five and still riding line for the Double R, was willing to sit up until near daylight playing seven-up with you, it was pretty good evidence that he liked you. Even if he succeeded in winning nine out of ten games, as was usually the case. Seven-Up took a keen delight in proving to Laskar that the latter had much to learn before he could hope to master even the rudiments of "High-Low-Jack-and-Game." But the cowman didn't mind.

With the table clear came the inevitable invitation.

"Seven-up?" the line rider asked. Laskar nodded. "You ain't got a show tonight," old Seven-Up boasted. "I'm fit and when I'm fit I can play cards all around the man that made them!"

"You ain't forgot how to blow your own horn none, anyway," Laskar said, grinning.

"I'll ketch your jack for that, first pop," Seven-Up threatened—and did, much to Laskar's disgust.

"Reckon you've got them cards marked," he accused.

Seven-Up laid his cards down and gazed at his friend in reproach.

"You know better'n that, Las'," he said. "I ain't never cheated no man and I'm too old to start now. But there's men do mark their cards, Las'—I've knowed them. I knowed one man always marked all the high cards in every deck he played with. Nobody ever ketched him either, except me and then it was too late."

He laughed oddly and took up the jack of hearts, laying it face down and pressing the end of his thumbnail against its back, to make an impression.

"See that? It's in a corner, but it's round, like the shape of my nail."

"Yes," said Laskar. "A sorta semicircle."

"That's right. Well, the man I'm tellin' about didn't make no semicircle when he marked the cards. He had a thumb which had been smashed sometime and the nail growed crooked, like the man which owned it. Instead of being round, it was flat, straight across and when he pressed it down in a corner it made a little square. Or he'd make a triangle, or a cross, to show different cards. Oh, he had a fine system. Well, I—"

Seven-Up had seemed about to take Laskar into his confidence, but apparently thought better of it and instead laughed harshly.

"Your deal," he said, and they resumed playing.

By three o'clock in the morning, Laskar was convinced that Seven-Up was unbeatable that night. A little disgruntled, he turned in, with Seven-Up's gloating chuckles sounding in his ears.

Some time later, Laskar sat up suddenly in his bunk, wide awake. The wind was moaning and shrieking around the eaves of the dugout and smashing in heavy gusts against the north wall. The fire in the adobe fireplace was low and Laskar was chilled through in spite of his heavy blanket. He brushed a hand over the blanket and gave an exclamation of surprise.

"Snow!"

Instantly he was out of the bunk and striding to the door. He threw it open and was forced back by a bitter, driving, snow-laden wind that filled the world outside. He closed the door and stood a moment scowling. Then he went to Seven-Up and shook him awake.

"Roll out!" he ordered. "The bottom's dropped out of the sky!"

Seven-Up clambered out of his bunk and went to the window, through which snow was sifting into Laskar's bunk.

"A norther," said Seven-Up passionlessly. "I don't ride line today—nor mebbe for several days. And you don't go home. Forty miles. You'd never make five in this."

"Don't I know it!" Laskar said, scowling. "I don't need you to tell me."

His wife would worry about him. Or perhaps not. She might think he had delayed starting from town.

Laskar buttoned his coat and went out. He was nearly swept off his feet by the wind—a whirling, stinging, blinding wind that bit clear through his clothing.

The sky was gone, obscured by a swirling mist of white. Landmarks were wiped out. He tried to look north—homeward. The fine, flinty snow blinded him, the wind took his breath.

HE sought his pony and found it huddled against the wall of the dugout. The animal nickered appealingly when it saw him and he untied it and led it into the lean-to windbreak beside Seven-Up's horse. He fed both animals and fought his way back to the dugout.

Seven-Up was placidly stirring the frijoles in the pot. "Going home?" he questioned at Laskar's entrance.

Laskar told him where he could go.

"Tell you what," offered Seven-Up as they ate. "This here norther reminds me of the one we got last year. About this time too. Sure was a hummer. Early, but it stayed a whole month. I didn't git to town for Christmas last year."

"I'm going to be home for Christmas!" declared Laskar.

"Why sure. Today's only December first. Reckon this won't last."

Seven-Up dished out another plate of frijoles for himself, but Laskar declined a second helping of the beans.

They passed the rest of the day playing cards—seven-up. They went to bed early and next morning, when Laskar eagerly stuck his head out the doorway, the blizzard was raging with unabated fury. Closing the door, he walked silently back to the fire. He threw a fresh log on it and sat down to stare gloomily into the flames.

They had beans and soda biscuits for breakfast and played cards until dinnertime. Neither man being hungry, they skipped this meal and played through until supper time. For supper they had frijoles and soda biscuits again. Afterward they resumed the card playing. It was seven-up. That was the only game Seven-Up knew—the only one he cared to know. He would play no other.

The proportion of Seven-Up's victories ran about nine in ten. Laskar had been beaten so much that he no longer saw any humor in Seven-Up's uncanny luck. Both ceased to joke about the game and played in grim earnest, with a concealed animosity that promised trouble. It was midnight when they quit. Laskar had won three games, Seven-Up twenty-seven.

Next morning, the blizzard, instead of abating, was raging harder than ever.

"We're holed in, all right," Laskar mourned, peering through a two-inch opening in the door. "Likely we'll stay here till spring. There's some steers drifting—plenty of them. Fences won't hold them in this storm."

"Nothin'll hold them," seconded Seven-Up. "If the storm keeps up the Mexicans will have plenty of stock next season, if they don't freeze before they get to the Rio Grande."

Laskar closed the door and came to the table, yawning. "Might as well play seven-up," he said.

"Want some frijoles?" queried Seven-Up.

Laskar turned on him in sudden temper. "I'm sick of those beans!" he snapped.

"Shucks," said Seven-Up, placatively, "they're good enough when you ain't got anything better."

"Eat 'em then," sneered Laskar. "Some folks don't want nothin' better. It all depends on how a man's been raised."

Seven-Up did not answer and devoted himself to his frijoles. Now table etiquette was a thing that had never concerned him—nor Laskar, for that matter. Seven-Up ate as he always ate, with his knife, chewing loudly with open mouth. It was not a pretty sight, nor were the noises nice to hear. And Laskar was hardly better. Yet as he watched, he sneered and his eyes were malevolent.

"Mebbe you'd just as soon stop eatin' like a pig at a swill trough," he said presently, his voice writhing with suppressed rage.

Seven-Up looked at him in mild surprise. "There ain't nothin' wrong with my eating," he said. "I've always et this way and I ain't stopping now." He lifted another knife blade of beans.

"Put 'em down!" flared Laskar. He jerked out his .45 and shoved its muzzle close to Seven-Up, his eyes burning with anger. "I don't care how you've et," he declared. "You ain't going to do no swillin' whilst I'm lookin' at you!"

Seven-Up slowly lowered the knife. "Las'," he said gently, "you ain't naturally mean. Being holed up here has got on your nerves. So soon, too. I was hopin' we'd be able to get along. Last year I stood it twenty days before I got to quarrelin' with myself an' seein' things."

Laskar sheathed his gun, grinning with embarrassment. "I reckon that's right," he agreed. "It ain't your eating. It's me. Curious how bein' holed up will bother a man."

"Right curious," Seven-Up affirmed. He picked up his knife again and began eating, but carefully, mincing his food with elephantine delicacy.

During the day they took turns at door and window, watching the cattle drift by. There was an endless procession of them, now a mere dribble, now a surging wave of gaunt bodies and tossing horns that no human agency could stop.

Later in the afternoon, Seven-Up gave his attention to the pot of frijoles. Laskar remained beside the window, watching and frowning at this thing that kept him from going home as though he could not understand it.

Seven-Up did not invite him to share the frijoles when he lifted them, steaming, from the pot, fearing a return of his anger. He ate his own meal stealthily, keeping a wary eye on his companion.

But Laskar was in control of himself now. His anger had flared out and released some of the tension. He would not lose his temper again, he told himself.

As for Seven-Up, he had boasted of his self-possession, but the morning of the tenth day of their imprisonment, he crawled out of his bunk with a strange light in his eyes.

"Them cattle has been goin' past here all night," he said. "Black cattle—all black—a million of them, with a woman drivin' them. That was my daughter. She waved and said she'd be back. Told me to wait for her. But she won't come back. I've waited twenty years."

He opened the door and was about to rush out when Laskar caught him and pulled him back, kicking the door shut. Seven-Up struggled, but his strength could not match the younger man's.

"Lemme be," he pleaded. "I'm goin' out to look for her. She'll freeze!"

"She would, if she was out there," Laskar agreed. "But she ain't. And your own gizzard would be a hunk of ice before you'd traveled a quarter of a mile."

Seven-Up cackled as Laskar carried him to his bunk and put him in. But he subsided and fell asleep. Next morning, when he remembered the incident he was not exactly pleased. He tried to be pleasant to Laskar, but this was something that was becoming difficult for both of them.

The dusk in the dugout was perpetual because of the drift of snow against the windows and the air was stale. As the days passed the snow crept higher and higher.

"Ought to git that snow away from there," Seven-Up said, the morning of the fifteenth day. "Pretty soon we won't have no light at all."

"Then get it away," Laskar said shortly.

SEVEN-UP was slowly beginning to feel that Laskar was imposing on him. The younger man had accepted his hospitality and was eating his food. Why couldn't he contribute his share of work? He had known Laskar two years and always thought him a generous, friendly fellow, eager to help a friend. Now he saw him as small, mean, narrow-minded. Why he didn't want to do anything! He loafed while Seven-Up went to the spring for water. He would not help with the dishes, nor cook, and he complained about the beans.

The one thing he did was to feed the horses. And now Seven-Up began to think he was only doing that so he could favor his own horse.

He decided to investigate, so waited until Laskar seemed asleep. His hand was on the door when he heard Laskar's voice:

"Where you going?"

Seven-Up's eyes blazed with anger. "You're starvin' my horse," he snarled. "I'm goin' out to feed him!"

Laskar slid out of the bunk. "I'm starvin' your horse!" he repeated. "If you knowed that, why ain't you been doin' your own feeding? You're too lazy, that's why!"

Seven-Up stood rigid, hand on door. "I wouldn't say that again, Las'."

"Why not?"

"Because I'm tellin' you so. And if you chirp one little wee chirp again about me bein' lazy *I'm going to let daylight clear through you!*"

So it was out in the open at last—the blind unreasoning hatred that is born of cabin fever. Now the pretense of friendship was gone. They would lie for hours, each in his own bunk, watching the other, sneering at the little habits each would never have noticed under

normal conditions. They liked nothing about one another.

Seven-Up became convinced that Laskar was planning to kill him. He waited until the younger man was really asleep, then slipped out and deftly removed Laskar's knife and gun. Smiling with secret satisfaction, he got back to his own bunk and to sleep.

But his dreams were troubled things. Aroused by his muttering, Laskar awoke and listened.

"Twenty years," Seven-Up mumbled. "Ain't seen sight of her. Likely she's dead, or worse. Bill Henley, he's got her. He couldn't play square—only thing square about him was that square thumbnail—and he cheated with that." Then his mumbles grew incoherent, and Laskar stopped listening and drifted back to sleep.

The following morning saw an end of their food. By scraping the pot they got enough frijoles for breakfast, no more. Had not Seven-Up been obliged to share with Laskar, he would have had plenty, even with the blizzard, until the Double R wagon came round again. He yielded to bitterness.

"You've done et more than your share," he complained. "You're a blamed hog, that's what you are."

"You're a liar!" said Laskar. His eyes were horribly malevolent.

"I say you're a blamed hog!" repeated Seven-Up.

Laskar clutched at his empty holster.

"I knowed it," said Seven-Up. "You been wantin' to kill me all along. That's why I took your knife and gun. They're hid out! I reckon I fooled you."

Laskar's eyes took on a designing gleam. "I wasn't going to kill you, Seven-Up," he said. "I wouldn't do nothin' like that. Gimme my knife and gun and I'll go out and fetch your daughter. She can't be far."

Seven-Up laughed discordantly. "You ain't foolin' me none," he said. "You just want to get your knife and gun back. Don't you worry about my daughter. She drives them black steers past here every little while. When she comes past again I'm gittin' her myself."

Laskar went to the window and scraped the frost from the glass. "I reckon we're done for," he said. "There's no sign of a let-up."

He knew his own self-control was going, for he thought he saw things in the snow which could not be there and sometimes he heard himself laughing when there was nothing to laugh about.

Once he thought he saw a rider on a black horse approaching the cabin. The rider looked frozen, lolling in his saddle. But Laskar said nothing about it because he knew there was really no rider there.

Seven-Up's reference to his daughter kept recurring to Laskar. There was something familiar about this story. Had he heard it before, or had it happened somewhere in his own experience?

"Seven-Up," he asked, "what's your right name?"

The old man stopped twirling his thumbs and his eyes flashed with a cunning light.

"You want to know my name so you can tell Bill Henley to look out for me. But I ain't telling! I ain't telling nobody but Bill Henley and when I find him I'll tell him!"

Late that afternoon, the sky cleared, the snow stopped, the wind died down. A cold sun bathed the world in a shimmering, glittering, blinding light. But neither man knew it. They had sunk into a complete lethargy, without even the energy to hate any more.

For two days they lay in their bunks, not even stirring out to feed the horses. On the twenty-fourth day of their imprisonment, Laskar staggered out of his blankets into the perpetual darkness of the dugout.

"Pile out, you old fool!" he grated, shaking Seven-Up. "We're going to play our harps pretty soon and we might as well tune up. Let's play seven-up."

Seven-Up crawled out of his bunk. It was easy to see that he was not standing the strain of hunger and lonesomeness as well as Laskar. There was an unnatural color in his face and an insane look in his eyes. Only the latter part of Laskar's speech interested him.

"Seven-Up?" he said. "Sure, I'll play seven-up. That's my name, ain't it?"

Laskar drew out a roll of bills. "Let's play for something," he said. "I'll put up this money. If you win, you get it. If you lose you tell me your right name. Is it a go?"

"My name," Seven-Up said thickly. "My name. You can't win, Las'. I can beat the man who made the cards. Sure, it's a go."

Laskar did not win. Seven-Up swept his money away and cackled jeeringly. Broke, Laskar took from his pocket a gold chain and locket and put them on the table.

"I'm putting this up," he said.

SEVEN-UP drew the locket to him. The sight of it wrought an amazing change in him. The insane light died out of his eyes and was succeeded by a cold, metallic gleam. The hectic color in his face changed to a queer pallor.

"Las'," he asked, "where did you get this locket?"

"It's my wife's. What's it your business?"

"What's your wife's name?"

"Amy."

"What was her last name before she married you?"

"Legget," said Laskar, his interest now aroused.

Seven-Up closed his eyes for a moment. "Las'," he said, "It's a curious thing that I never noticed before you'd lost a thumb. When did you lose it?"

"When I was thirteen years old," Laskar said coldly. "What's that your business?"

"You're a liar!" shrieked Seven-Up. "You're Bill Henley!"

He reached for his holster, to find it empty. Making queer throaty noises, he staggered to the door, flung it open and fought his way through the snow to the lean-to, where the horses were tethered. Laskar followed, a growing fear in his eyes.

When Seven-Up reached the lean-to, he fumbled under a pile of snow-covered straw, bringing forth the knife and gun he had taken from Laskar. He was straightening up when Laskar hurled himself forward, striking savagely at the hand that held the weapon.

He succeeded in knocking the gun from Seven-Up's grasp and it hurtled several feet away to bury itself in a snow drift.

Seven-Up snarled like a cornered wolf and tried to use the knife, but Laskar seized his arm.

Locked tightly, they reeled around in the snow, fighting silently and desperately. Seven-Up's age was against him, but he was fighting with a ferocity that had twenty years of brooding for vengeance behind it.

A dozen times he came near twisting his knife hand free. But Laskar's ability saved him and his muscles did not fail.

They crashed against a corner of the dugout and rebounded to the edge of a huge snow-drift. There Laskar exerted his strength, forcing Seven-Up back into the snow.

Seven-Up lost his balance, dropped the knife and went down, Laskar on top. The younger man lay with his full weight on Seven-Up.

"Don't," complained Seven-Up feebly. "You're hurtin' me, Las'. Git off." He whined with pain. "Git off, Las'. I'm layin' acrost a rock."

Laskar wriggled to one side, but to make sure, he swept a hand under the old man.

He struck something hard that was not a rock and that caused him to pull his hand back suddenly.

"Help me!" he panted.

Together they clawed away the snow and disclosed the body of a man, frozen and rigid. The face was the face of the man Laskar had seen riding the black horse many nights ago. He stood up and passed a hand over his eyes. Where was the black horse? Mechanically he glanced around at the lean-to. The black horse was there, snuggled between the other two.

Suddenly he realized what Seven-Up was doing.

"Hey!" he cried.

Seven-Up was astride the dead man, clutching at his left hand and screaming with rage. "It's Bill Henley!"

In proof, he held up to Laskar's view the left hand of the corpse on which was a curiously deformed thumbnail.

Laskar did not stop to examine it. He pulled Seven-Up to his feet. At once he had a new fight on his hands. He was trying to keep the old man away from the body when he heard shouts and saw half-a-dozen cowboys approaching—his own men.

They got Seven-Up back in the dugout and plied him with whisky and food. They told Laskar how his wife had worried about him and how as soon as the storm ended they had come out to look for him.

That night they played cards, they danced, they sang, they played cards and yelled in pure joy.

It was all sweet music to Seven-Up and Laskar.

Christmas day dawned clear and cold. Seven-Up still weak, but rational, awoke to the smell of cooking food and the sound of cheerful voices.

"Say," he said, "are you real gents or am I still seein' things?" He looked at Laskar. "Did I hear you say your wife's name was Amy Legget? Don't lie to me, Las'," he pleaded.

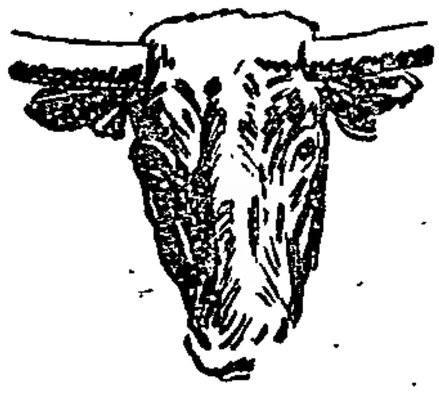
"I reckon you wasn't dreaming, father-in-law," Laskar whooped, passing over the whisky bottle.

Seven-Up passed a hand over his forehead. "And was I seein' things when I thought I'd found Bill Henley out there in the snow?" he asked hesitatingly.

"That was Bill Henley, all right," Laskar said. "The boys searched him before they planted him and found letters and such to prove he was Bill Henley all right."

Seven-Up sighed deeply and lay back in the bunk. "Las'," he said, "there's one more thing I'd like to know. I always thought Bill Henley had somethin' to do with Amy leavin' home. Did he?"

"Hush, you old fool," said Laskar softly. "That's another story—one Amy will tell you when we get back home to-night."



CATTLE FROM THE WEST

The End of the Texas Longhorn

By WILLIAM CARTER

MORE stories have been written about the stocking of the northern ranges by Texas cattle than probably any other phase of the cow business. But the leggy longhorn, though surrounded with romantic legends, was not always important outside of Texas.

Early ranchers of Kansas and Colorado quietly began their own livestock industry and were using pure-bred Durham and Shorthorn cattle from England. They feared the influx of Texas steers which might bear ticks and fever and fought bitterly to keep them out.

In 1867 the Colorado legislature passed a law forbidding the importation of "any bull, cow, ox, steer or cattle of whatever description known as Texas cattle, for the purpose of small stock raising, growing, herding, feeding, or for any purpose whatsoever."

The law was slightly futile and Texas cattle did come in. But meanwhile, a much better grade of cow was coming east from Oregon.

The original Shorthorns and Durhams of Colorado had trickled west into Oregon in the 1840's, and there they had multiplied like rabbits. Now they were coming east again in response to growing demand for meat and to the outreaching steel arms of the railroad.

During the early 80's and late 70's, Wyoming ranchers took off each spring for Oregon.

There they bought cattle and horses and began the drive back to the mountain states.

These drives were much like the big drives from the south—dust, thirst, hot sun, Indians and all the rest. The campaign of 1876, after the Custer massacre, had crushed the Sioux, but renegade bands still operated off the reservations and life was always a chancy matter in crossing the Wyoming mountains.

Cattlemen drove nevertheless, using tame oxen from freight companies as lead steers. These tractable beasts could be driven through mountain streams and the herd would then follow where it would not go alone.

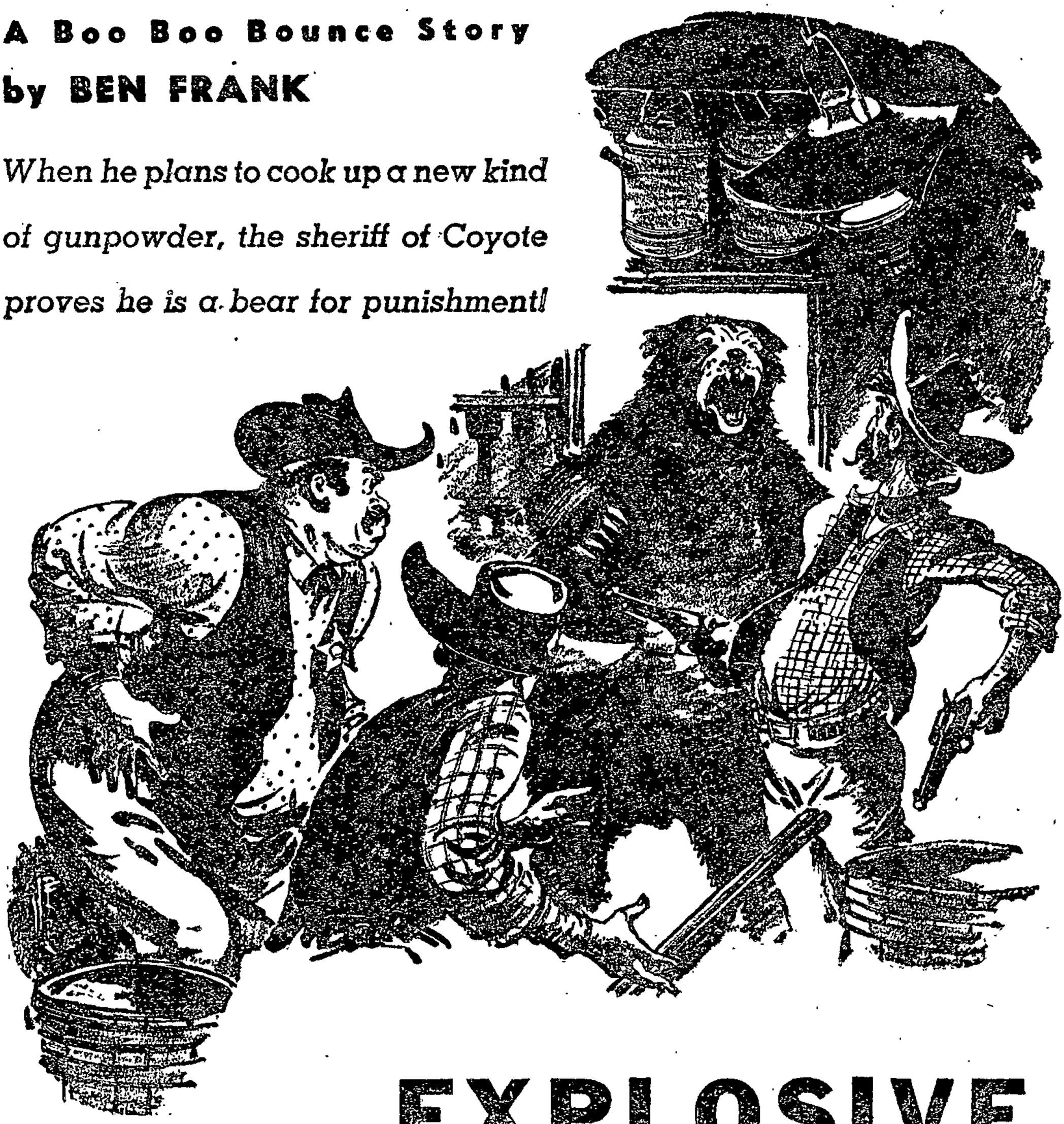
The herds came through South Pass into the Sweetwater Creek section where they split, some going north to the Dakotas, some south to Colorado, some on into the Big Horns.

So did the northern states fill with herds which were in a short time to spell the end of the Texas longhorn.

A Boo Boo Bounce Story

by BEN FRANK

When he plans to cook up a new kind of gunpowder, the sheriff of Coyote proves he is a bear for punishment!



EXPLOSIVE,

and no mistake

IT is in the fall of the year when I get up one morning and find I am feeling my age on account of I have not slept worth two-cents the whole night.

I stumble down to breakfast, and say, "My dear, old age has at last caught up with me. It is time I am retiring from being deputy sheriff of Coyote County, U.S.A., and no mistake!"

"Hopewell," my wife says harsh, "you will do nothing of the sort! Just because there is a rumor going around and about that Two-gun Grogan is in the country—"

"My dear," I say hurt, "I never once thought of that. But since you mentioned it, how would you like for your husband to come home with a gaping

hole in his head."

"Phooey!" she says. "One hole more or less in a head like yours would make little difference."

So I eat the rest of my breakfast in silence, knowing since I must choose between two evils, I will take the lesser: namely, run the risk of meeting Two-gun Grogan, no matter if I cannot sleep from worrying, rather than resign when my wife is not favorable to such.

I go outside and see the sun is shining no little pretty and the goldenrods are a tasty yellow. But I am cheered none what-so-ever by the beauty of nature, for hovering over me is the shadow of Two-gun Grogan.

By and by, I come to Nail-head Nutter's general store, and who should be standing in the door but Nail-head himself with his fingers twisting his flour-sack apron and a no little worried frown on his seamy face.

"Hopewell," he says, "it is a time like this when I wisht Coyote County had someone for sheriff besides a fat, brainless jasper who does nothing but eat and sleep."

"Nail-head," I retort indignant, "that is no way to talk about the choice of the people. Leave us remember that Sheriff Boo Boo Bounce and I, his deputy, always gets their man."

"Hog-wash!" Nail-head says ungentlemanly.

"Also," I say, "if you would trust your money to the bank instead of hiding it around and about your store—"

There is no need for me to speak further, for Nail-head has gone back into his store, slamming the door no little violent.

I wander on along the street and see a strange outfit indeed tied to the hitch-rail in front of Chin-nick Chancy's barber shop. This outfit consists of a span of very flea-bit mules and a covered wagon on which is painted in bright red letters "Doctor Big-chief Rattlesnake Ringle's Famous Tonic, Good for Man and Beast." Beyond the wagon comes the sound of a man speaking very deep basso.

Stepping around the wagon, I see a number of citizens staring with mouths wide. At what they are staring is a strange gent, very handsome in a cut-away coat and a stove-pipe hat, who is holding a rope tied to the collar of the biggest black bear I ever seen.

"Yes, sir, my friends," this gent is saying, "there ain't a smarter bear in the wide world than Matilda herself! She boxes and rassles and rides a bicycle. She can do everything but talk."

I crowd in a little closer amid the Polecatters, who are no little filled with marvel by such a smart bear.

"Tonight," the gent continues, "Matilda will perform for you. Bring your families, gents. This will be a sight for one and all. Incidental, I will sell to a few lucky customers my few remaining bottles of Doctor Big-chief Rattlesnake Ringle's Famous Tonic at the unheard of reduced price of one buck per each."

At this point, I depart, for I see coming my way old man Bundy, editor of the *Polecat News*. He is no friend of I or Boo Boo and takes no little delight in making nasty remarks about us in his news-sheet. I know, should he get me cornered, he will ask embarrassing questions as to what we have been doing about this rumor of Two-gun Grogan, which is nothing.

I go into the jail office somewhat tiptoey, for you never know but what Boo Boo will be taking a nap. But he is wide awake with a spoon in one hand and numerous mixing bowls and pans on his desk and various other articles too numerous to mention, including some empty shotgun shells.

"Boo Boo," I say aghast, "have you took up cooking?"

He shakes his head a strong negative.

"Hopewell, leave us find a chair in some corner and set down without further comment. I am in the process of inventing."

"No!" I say, setting down. "What?"

"Gunpowder."

"But," I say, "I thought somebody had already invented—"

"True, deputy, but there is always room for improvement."

"But," I say, "it don't work so bad as it is."

"Hopewell," he says, slamming down the spoon with a noisy clatter, "I see there is no keeping yore mouth shut until you learn all details. So I will explain. Likely yuh can recall the days when my Grandpappy Bounce was around and about Polecat?"

"Why, yes," I reply. "Grandpappy Bounce tipped the scales at some three hundred-odd pounds, same as you do, and had a two-foot long beard. Come

winter, he used to peddle his sugar-cured hams to the citizens of—"

"Correct, deputy. Also besides, Grandpappy was a genius in other ways, but his greatest accomplishment was making a right bangy gunpowder for the early settlers."

"Do tell?" I say, somewhat astounded.

BOO BOO holds up a yellowed slip of paper and smiles pleasant.

"This, Hopewell, is none other than Grandpappy's receipt for gunpowder, which I accidently run acrost recent. It is no little remarkable, for it contains ingredients very cheap and common to all homes, which no one but Grandpappy would think of making a high explosive of. I hope to not only duplicate his powder-making success, but improve same."

"Why?"

"To get rich." Boo Boo sighs no little despondent. "Hopewell, it has occurred to me of late, since it is reported that Two-gun Grogan is in our territory, that I no longer wish to be sheriff of Coyote County. So I will improve Grandpappy's receipt, organize a powder-making company, resign from being sheriff and take over the presidency of said company."

"But," I say, worried, "what will become of me?"

"You," he smiles fatherly, "are in my future plans. I will make you vice-president."

"Thank you," I say grateful. "When do I start."

"As of now." He picks up two loaded shotgun shells. "It is you, my vice-president, who will test the fire-power of my explosive by shooting off these two shells in yore shotgun."

"Boo Boo," I say, feeling somewhat faint, "if said powder is of too high power, my shotgun may explode. Leave us hire somebody else to test the—"

"No. It is the vice-president's duty to make all tests, and nobody else's. Get yore shotgun, and leave us saddle up and ride to some private, out-of-the-way spot."

At that moment, the door opens, and in walks No-work Norton.

"Oh, oh!" Boo Boo says exasperate. "Fall is sure enough here."

He is right, for in the fall, No-work always puts in a appearance, for he is not one to spend the winter out of jail if he can help it.

"Greetings, gents," he smiles.

That is when I see he has a chicken under each arm.

"Sheriff," No-work says, all of a sudden looking no little remorseful, "once again the worst in me has come to the fore. I was walking by Grandma Grinder's chicken house and temptation befell me. Kindly arrest me for chicken stealing, and leave us get out the checker board, and for two-bits a game, I will—"

"No-work," Boo Boo says indignant, "you are a pest, and no mistake! Take them hens back to Grandma Grinder's immediate!"

No-work's bleary eyes fixes on the pots and pans on Boo Boo's desk, and he smiles happy.

"Gettin' dinner, I see."

"No-work," Boo Boo roars, "scram!"

"You cannot do this to me!" No-work says, also indignant. "As a citizen, I demand yuh do yore duty. Arrest me, or I will raise a row that will get into the *Polecat News!*"

"No-work," Boo Boo says, his face losing color, "consider yoreself under arrest. Now, kindly trot over to see Judge Jackson at the courthouse and confess yore crime so's he can pass sentence."

"Thank yuh, sheriff," No-work beams. "Incidental, as soon as the judge has given me six months or so, I will return the hens to Grandma Grinder, then come back for a game of checkers."

"Scat," Boo Boo says, "for I am a no little busy man."

No-work departs, whistling very trilly, and Boo Boo turns to me. "Deputy," he says, "leave us test Grandpappy's receipt."

Although I do not like the idea, and then some, I see there is no other way for me to become vice-president. So I get my shotgun. Soon we are on our way into the country.

"Boo Boo," I say plaintive as we ride along the trail, "should I lose a few fingers in this experiment, I would be somewhat at a handicap of being vice-president, or anything."

"Leave us not discuss the inconsequential," Boo Boo smiles. "Rather, leave us look on the bright side of life, such as becoming millionaires."

"But," I murmur, "without fingers—"

Then I lift my eyes, and what should I see but old Wrap-around Waggle's tumbled-down cabin setting amongst some cottonwoods. That is when I have

a inspiration, for Wrap-around Waggle is a string-saver of considerable fame and has a ball of string which is a good four-feet across.

"Boo Boo," I say, "leave us get a long length of string from Wrap-around, tie it to the triggers of my gun and thusly make the test at a safe distance."

"Hopewell," Boo Boo smiles, "undoubtedly you are the smartest man in the state. But"—and he frowns sudden—"Wrap-around would not let nobody have a inch of his string."

"You get him away from his cabin," I say, "and I will do the rest."

"Deputy," Boo Boo says admiringly, "with yore brains and my ability, we will go far in making explosives, and no mistake!"

We ride up to the cabin and dismount. Wrap-around Waggle comes to the door, sees us and smiles somewhat suspicious amongst his ragged whiskers.

"Howdy," he says distant. "I ain't stole nothin' since—"

"Wrap-around," Boo Boo says kindly, "we have come to do yuh a favor. Whilst riding along the trail a piece back, what should we see but a length of green string caught on a bush. Knowing you would want the pleasure of untangling it yoreself, we left it on the bush."

Wrap-around's eyes get no little glittery. "Sheriff," he says, "I allus voted for you an' allus will. How far back is this bush?"

"A quarter-mile or less," Boo Boo says innocent.

He says no more, for Wrap-around Waggle is on his way down the trail no little brisk.

I GO into the cabin. There is a strong red string wrapped around and about the four-foot ball, which I unwind and find to be a nice length and put into my pocket.

Boo Boo and I ride on. We come to a rocky hollow, and Boo Boo says, "Vice-president, here is our testing ground, and no mistake."

We take my double-barrel and brace it solid amongst some boulders, tie to each trigger a length of string, then find us a cozy shelter behind a clutter of rocks.

"Now, Hopewell," Boo Boo says, putting his fingers in his ears, "make the test, one barrel at a time."

I give a string a pull. There is a sharp click of a hammer falling, and nothing more.

Boo Boo takes one finger out of a ear. He is smiling happy. "Hopewell," he says, "think of it! A noiseless explosive!"

"Nothing exploded," I tell him.

"Oh," he says, worried. "Try the other barrel."

I give another tug. Again there is no shot.

Boo Boo's three chins quiver no little, and he is sad indeed.

"Deputy," he says unhappy, "leave us return to Polecat."

We are almost to town when I think of something.

"Boo Boo," I ask, "what do you know about chemistry?"

"Nothing," he says, still husky with disappointment.

"That's the trouble," I tell him. "What you need to do is read up on the chemistry of gunpowder. No doubt, your grandpappy left some ingredient of his receipt out purposely, not wanting every Tom, Dick and Harry to go into the powder-making business."

Boo Boo gives this some thought. Then, sudden, "Where at could I procure a book on chemistry?"

"The library," I say.

"Hopewell," he says, beaming very happy, "remind me to raise yore salary the minute we make our first thousand. How-some-ever, I will get the book myself. For some time, I have been looking for a excuse to call on Miss Twiddle at the library. Ever since she has come to town, I have noticed she is no less pretty than a dish of crusty apple pie with a dipper of whipped cream added to boot. Now that I am about to become a rich man—"

His eyes get a far-away look in them, for nothing Boo Boo likes better than apple pie with whipped cream.

We come to the library, and he waddles in. Presently he comes out with a red book under one arm and a blushing smile on his face.

"Hopewell," he says breathless, "I should ought to have gone into the explosive business the first day Miss Twiddle come here."

We go to the jail, and there is No-work Norton setting in a chair, waiting with a cigar in his mouth very content.

"Gents," he says, "the judge has give me six months for chicken stealin'. Now,

Boo Boo, leave us dig out the checker board an' get started."

Boo Boo slams the réd book on his desk, making pots and pans rattle.

"No-work, I have no time for checkers. Kindly remove yore feet from my desk and pick out the cell yuh wish to spend the winter in."

"Boo Boo," No-work says, looking hurt, "this is no way to treat a steady customer. Just to make it more interestin' for you, I will play yuh ten men against twelve."

"No-work," Boo Boo bellows, "get into yore cell! An' if yuh do not shut up about checkers, I will lock the door!"

"I would not fancy being locked up," No-work says quick. "I will take the cell with the south exposure on account of it is somewhat warmer in winter than the others."

Sighing sad, he goes into the cell at the end of the hall.

Boo Boo sets down and opens the red book. "Now, deputy, kindly find a distant chair and retain a quiet quiet whilst I pursue the chemistry of gunpowder."

This I do, smoking my pipe and watching Boo Boo as he turns pages and blinks no little rapid. Sudden like, he picks up a pencil and begins to copy from the book on the back of a envelope.

"Deputy," he says, holding up the envelope, "here is a list of things every chemist must have. Kindly trot over to the drug store and purchase same for me."

I go to the drug store and hand the list to old man Pestel.

"Umm," he says, "goin' to poison yore wife, Hopewell?"

"Leave us not be funny," I say indignant. "This stuff is for none other than Boo Boo Bounce, sheriff of Coyote County."

Presently the old man hands me a sack of bottles, which I take back to the jail.

"Kindly make a neat row of all chemicals on my desk," Boo Boo commands.

I do so, and he eyes the bottles thoughtful.

"Hopewell," he says, closing the red book, "whoever writ this book didn't even know how to write English so a man could understand it. It would be a waste of time to follow such a dumb jasper's instructions, so I will do some experimenting. After all, great inventors always used their own heads. Kindly remove a few corks from said bottles."

I do so, and he picks up various bottles and pours a few drops from each into a bowl. To this he adds salt and sugar and numerous other things and begins to stir all with a spoon.

"Deputy," he says, "whilst I am thusly engaged, kindly remove powder and shot from some half-dozen shells."

I am finishing the last shell and putting the powder very careful in a paper sack when there is a great commotion from outside.

"See what the excitement is," Boo Boo says.

I go to the window. Instantaneous, I know something is wrong, for numerous Polecatters are milling about the Red-dog Stage, and old Six-hoss Hanson, the driver, is setting up on his seat, yelling and waving his arms no little violent.

"Boo Boo," I say, alarmed, "trouble is afoot!"

"Go investigate," he says. "I cannot leave my powder-making as of the present moment."

I put on my hat and go to where at the stage stands in front of the post office. Forty-rod Frye is present, looking on, so I say, "Forty-rod, what's all the rumpus?"

"Why," he says, "seems that Two-gun Grogan tried to hold up the stage in Grasshopper Pass. But ole Six-hoss drove right on, so Two-gun shot him."

"He don't look shot," I say, feeling cold about my spine.

"Shot Six-hoss in his peg-leg," Forty-rod says.

Just then, some men help Six-hoss down from the driver's seat. Sure enough, when he tries to take a step on his wooden leg, it gives way with him, and old Six-hoss cusses fierce.

"Dad-rat-it!" he fumes. "Best peg-leg I ever had. If I ever get my hands on that two-gun sidewinder, I'll unscrew his head from his shoulders!"

Still cussing violent, he hops into the post office.

AT that moment, who should come up to me but old man Bundy, editor of the *Polecat News*, with a nasty glint in his eyes.

"Here's our brave deputy sheriff," he says loud. "Now all will be well, and Two-gun Grogan will meet his fate."

"Mr. Bundy," I say dignified, "leave us make no wisecracks at a time like

this. You may be sure, the sheriff and I will take proper action against Two-gun Grogan in the immediate future."

"Hopewell," Bundy says wicked, "I'll go back to the jail with yuh. It would be no little interesting to see Boo Boo Bounce go into action. Heh, heh!"

I ignore his "heh-heh" and walk to the jail, him tagging along very disgusting. We go in, and Boo Boo looks up from his stirring, seeing Bundy and scowling no little unpleasant.

"Deputy," he says, "open the windows wide to leave out the bad odor yuh have brought with yuh—oh, it's you, Mr. Bundy. Thought my deputy had brought in a skunk."

"Boo Boo," Bundy says gritty, "just because you are the sheriff, don't think yuh can insult a private citizen!"

"Deputy," Boo Boo says formal, "kindly report upon yore recent investigation."

I do so, and Boo Boo's face turns pale, and then some.

"Heh, heh!" Bundy cackles. "Now, sheriff, mebbe yuh'll go looking for the outlaw. That is, if you can get away from your cooking."

"I ain't cookin'!" Boo Boo yells. "I'm makin'—" He stops sudden, not wanting Old Bundy to know about the gunpowder. "Mr. Bundy," he goes on icy, "never fear, Boo Boo Bounce always gets his man, and no mistake!"

"Heh, heh!" Bundy says again. "Then why ain't yuh out finding from Six-hoss what happened and where?"

"That is exactly what I am about to do," Boo Boo says, reaching for his hat. "Come, deputy, leave us investigate."

We all leave the jail together. Still heh-hehhing, Bundy turns toward his newspaper office, and Boo Boo and I go to the post office. Six-hoss is not there, but we learn he has gone over to Nail-head Nutter's store to look for a straight-grained singletree to whittle a new peg-leg out of.

When we step out of the post office, Boo Boo stops and strokes his three chins in deep thought.

"Deputy," he says, "it occurs to me that we have something more important to do than fooling around with Two-gun Grogan: namely, making a second test of my new explosive. After all, we are practically through with the law business, so why risk getting ourselves shot at simply because Six-hoss Hanson had his peg-leg split down the middle?"

This seems no little sensible to me, so I agree.

We return to the jail, and there is No-work Norton setting at Boo Boo's desk with two loaded shotgun shells in his hand.

"Boo Boo," he says, "I thought if I helped yuh load these empty shells, I could save yuh some time. Thusly we can get out the checker board and play a game or two."

"No-work," Boo Boo says grateful, "it was utmostly thoughtful to load the shells for me. Soon, no doubt, I can find time to play yuh a game. But at the moment, I have work to do. Hopewell, load yore double-barrel and leave us get a move on."

Again we ride to the rocky hollow. Soon we have the shotgun wedged amongst the rocks, ready to go with the red strings tied to the triggers. We squat down in our shelter very tense.

"One, two, three, fire!" Boo Boo says.

I do, and there is a terrific roar.

"Try the other barrel," Boo Boo says hoarse.

I pull the string, and again there is a big bang.

Boo Boo throws his arms about me in happy delight.

"Hopewell," he says, "success at last! Now I can woo Miss Twiddle with a clear conscious, knowing I will be a rich man soon, and you can get started at being vice-president."

Upon reaching town, we ride toward the library. It is noon, and Miss Twiddle comes tripping out to go to dinner.

Boo Boo tips his hat gallant. "Ah, my dear Miss Twiddle," he says honey-fied, "you are looking utmostly lovely, and no mistake, today. I am about to go eat and would no little enjoy spending fifty cents or so to buy yore dinner, also."

She gives him a cold stare from under long, golden eyelashes.

"Thank you, Mr. Bounce, but I have a previous engagement. An old friend from Kansas City is in town, and I promised— Oh, here he is now."

At that moment, who should come along but the gent who is the owner of Matilda, the trained bear, and the seller of Doctor Big-chief Rattlesnake Ringle's Tonic.

"Mr. Truehart," she says to this gent, "have you met the sheriff of this crum—I mean, nice little town?"

Boo Boo and I ride on, him looking utmostly despondent.

"Too bad," I murmur, "but he is right handsome."

"Handsome is as handsome does!" Boo Boo snorts. "Wait till I have made my first million and then see which way the wind blows."

At that moment, there comes a great noise from Nail-head Nutter's store. Then Nail-head rushes into the street, tearing his hair and white-faced and yelling bloody murder.

"Sheriff," he screams, "there's the biggest bear in the world in my store, tearin' the meat counter to pieces! Take that shotgun an' do yore duty!"

Boo Boo's face turns the color of a faded pair of overalls. "Deputy," he says, "rush into yon store an'—"

"But I have no more ammunition," I say faint.

That is when Mr. Truehart comes rushing up very worried.

"Matilda must've got loose," he pants, and takes a look through the door.

Sure enough it is Matilda helping herself to some choice steaks and pushing over counters and various odds and ends. By the time Mr. Truehart gets Matilda out of there, things are indeed in a mess, and Nail-head Nutter is fit to be tied.

"Boo Boo," he bellows, "arrest that man and lock him up tight till he pays for all damages! An' that bear's gotta be killed! If I hadn't run, she'd of et me shore as shootin'."

Boo Boo smiles happy, for nothing could suit him better than locking Mr. Truehart up. But Mr. Truehart is a very smart gent indeed and a fast talker, and then some.

"How," he says, "can I pay for damages when I am locked up in jail? I ain't got but a few dollars cash to my name. Besides, it was not I who did the damage. It was Matilda."

"But—" Boo Boo sputters.

"Another point," Mr. Truehart hurries on in deep basso very convincing, "should I not be locked up, I could ride to where at a friend of mine lives who owes me money, get said money and bring it back to pay for all this trouble."

"But," Boo Boo cuts in, "once out of town, yuh'd never—"

"Sheriff," Mr. Truehart says indignant, "I ain't that kind of a man. I am honest an' upright an' a gentleman of the old school!"

Boo Boo's face turns no little grim. "None-the-less, I must do my duty as a officer of the law."

"True, sheriff," Mr. Truehart smiles pleasant. "You must arrest Matilda and put her in jail, while I go raise money to pay damages."

"He's right, Boo Boo," Nail-head says sudden. "Mr. Truehart cannot raise no fifty smackeroos or so locked up in the can."

"I ain't goin' to have no bear on my hands," Boo Boo begins wrathful. "Matilda don't look none to friendly to me."

"I will put her in jail for you, sheriff," Mr. Truehart says helpful. "All you have to do is lock the door. I will return before the day is over with damage money and for Matilda, for I wish to put on a show."

"Arrest Matilda," Nail-head says grim, "an' stop dilly-dallying around, Boo Boo."

SO Boo Boo arrests Matilda, and Mr. Truehart leads her to the jail into a cell. Boo Boo locks the door of her cell very careful.

After Mr. Truehart leaves, Boo Boo frowns disgusted.

"Deputy," he says, "I do not like being sheriff to a bear, and no mistake! It don't seem quite dignified."

"I don't like it, neither," No-work Norton pipes up. "A bear ain't exactly my idea of a prison pal. No matter how smart Matilda is, I wouldn't want to have no checker game with the likes o' her."

"Leave us kindly return to yore cell," Boo Boo cuts in harsh, for he is in a nasty humor. Then he scowls at me some more, and I know that, as usual, he is trying to blame me for this.

"Deputy," he says, "I have not had time to think out all details, but I have a suspicion that someplace along the line, you have pulled a boner. It is probably yore fault that we have a bear—Oh, oh! Now I know. If you had been carrying a loaded weapon, Matilda would now be dead instead of here. Hopewell, you are—"

"Boo Boo," I say, thinking no little rapid, "leave us forget the present and look into the rosy future. Have you forgot your invention?"

A smile comes to his red face. "Hopewell, I had plumb forgot. Whilst I am in the business of mixing up a fresh batch

of explosive, kindly load two more shells with what I have already mixed. With a bear on our hands, it would be foolish to set around and about without a loaded weapon handy"

Boo Boo is stirring vigorous a bowl of his mixture and I have just finished loading two shells and am putting same in my shotgun when who should come staggering in but Forty-rod Frye, smiling broad.

"Greetings, one an' all," he says, setting down on a chair somewhat accidental. "Thought as how I would like to visit with you."

"Forty-rod," Boo Boo says cool, "I am too busy to gas at the moment. Also, leave me warn you that I do not approve of any gent dropping into my office who has had one too many."

Boo Boo's voice trails off, for Forty-rod's face has lost all color, and he is staring pop-eyed through the bars of Matilda's cell at Matilda herself.

"I've saw snakes and pink elephants," he chokes, "but now I'm seein' two bears in jail!"

He staggers to his feet, whips a bottle from a hip pocket and throws it out the window with a great crash of glass.

"Let me outa here!" he screams, and dives through the door, almost knocking it from the hinges.

"Hopewell," Boo Boo cries, "we got to catch him an' tell him about Matilda, or he'll run hisself to death!"

We rush outside, and see nothing of Forty-rod. Worried no little, we start across the courthouse yard and hear a noise in a tree. Who should be climbing upward amongst the limbs but Forty-rod himself and mumbling something about having took his last drink.

We get him out of the tree and calm him down, explaining how he saw a real bear and not two which come out of a bottle.

He is no little indignant. "Why didn't yuh tell me that before I throwed my bottle away," he yells.

Still snorting violent, he heads toward Jigger Joe's Emporium for a fresh bottle.

We return to the jail and here find catastrophe has fell, and no mistake. No-work Norton is standing in a corner, his face very pale and trembling. And what should Matilda have in her cell but the red book from the library.

"Didn't have anybody to play checkers with," No-work mumbles husky. "Thought I'd read yore book. When I walked by that bear's cell, she reached out an' grabbed the book right outa my hands."

"No-work," Boo Boo roars, "Miss Twiddle will be madder'n a rattlesnake with a boil on his tail if Matilda chews up that book! Get back into yore cell! This time, I'm lockin' yuh up, and no mistake!"

After Boo Boo has locked up No-work, he gives me a look that makes cold chills run along my spine.

"Deputy, recover the book! Or else!" trouble is yore fault, it is up to you to recover yon book."

"Boo Boo," I say, thinking desperate, "I have a wife, and—"

"Deputy, recover the book! Or else!"

"Leave us not be hasty," I say. "Matilda seems inclined to take a nap. Leave us be very quiet until she is asleep, and then—"

"Very well," he says, setting down and twiddling his thumbs angry.

Presently Matilda curls up and closes her eyes. Then she begins to snore gentle. Boo Boo and I tip-toe to her cell.

"Stand by with the shotgun," I whisper. "Open the door quiet, and I will dash in and out. But should Matilda stir, do not hesitate to shoot to kill."

"Never fear," Boo Boo says somewhat trembly, "yuh can always depend on me in a emergency, deputy."

He unlocks the door. Matilda snores on. Cautious, I ease into the cell. All goes well. I stoop to pick up the book. And then the worst happens. The office door whams open, and who should rush in very noisy but old Wrap-around Waggle, the string saver.

"Sheriff," he bellows, "I've been robbed! Somebody stole a good thirty feet of red string from my lovely ball."

Matilda leaps to her feet with a growl. She looks to be some fifteen feet tall, and her claws are like pitchfork tines.

Boo Boo drops my shotgun and heads for the outside door.

"Run for yore life!" he yells.

I try to run, but cannot even stand up. I shut my eyes and lay very still, for there is nothing to do but wait for Matilda to make a meal of me. But of a sudden, I realize I am not et, and open my eyes. I am alone.

I stagger into the office. It is empty, and the door stands open. I pick up my

shotgun and step into the open. Boo Boo and Wrap-around are up in separate trees, very pale indeed.

"Hopewell," Boo Boo says faint, "are yuh dead or alive?"

"Alive," I reply. "What happened to Matilda?"

Boo Boo slides to the ground. "She run around the jail. We must warn the citizens that a killer is loose in our midst. Come on down, Wrap-around."

Wrap-around just sets there on a limb, shaking his head.

Boo Boo and I go around the jail cautious, but Matilda has disappeared.

"Leave us start with Nail-head Nutter's store to spread the warning," Boo Boo says. "There's usually some loafers around and about the cracker barrel."

WE hurry over to Nail-head's store. We pay no mind to a strange saddle standing by the hitchrail, but when we see Mr. Truehart driving into town behind his mules, we stop.

He smiles happy. "Gents, I met my friend just a short ways from town. He was coming here to pay me his debt and had the money with him. Now I can pay all damages."

"Matilda," Boo Boo says hoarse, "has escaped!"

"What?" Mr. Truehart bleats, turning no little excited.

Boo Boo and I hurry on into the store. It is somewhat shadowy inside, and at first we can see only that three gents are in the room. Then of a sudden, we see no little clear, and I would give anything to have saw something else rather than what is going on.

Six-hoss Hanson is sitting on a chair, a jackknife in one hand and a singletree in the other, whittling himself a new peg-leg, only at the moment he is not whittling. He is looking mad and mumbling cusswords. Nail-head Nutter is standing by the meat counter with his hands stretched above his head, looking like he is having a visit from a ghost.

Standing in the middle of the room is a long-legged, whiskery gent with a sixgun in each hand, very businesslike, and no mistake! There is no need for introductions, for one and all know that he is none other than Two-gun Grogan!

He turns one six on me, and says grim, "Drop that shotgun!"

This I do instantaneous, and then some.

"Now," Two-gun says harsh, turning back to Nail-head, "get busy an' start diggin' out that money yuh keep hid around and about yore store!"

Just as Nail-head staggers toward one of his hiding places, there is a sudden crash at the back door, and who should come in but Matilda. She stands up on her hind legs utmostly fierce, opens her mouth and growls bloodcurdling.

Two-gun Grogan's eyes pop very wide, and for the moment he forgets his business of covering us. That is when old Six-hoss Hanson lets fly the singletree he has been whittling on. There follows a dull thud of wood against bone, and Two-gun drops both guns and crumples to the floor.

"Bust my wooden leg, will yuh, yuh dad-ratted varmint!" Six-hoss says angry. "That'll learn yuh not to go shootin'!"

Matilda lets out a deep growl and waves a paw suggestive. "Deputy," Boo Boo gurgles, "shoot to kill!"

I grab up the shotgun, take aim at Matilda and squeeze both triggers. Nothing happens but the harmless click of hammers. This is when I hear the front door slam and find that Matilda and I are alone in Nail-head's store, not counting Two-gun, who is trying to shake the fog out of his head. Not liking present company, I also dash through the door. Boo Boo, Nail-head and Six-hoss are standing in the street with three very chalky faces indeed.

"Hopewell," Boo Boo says hoarse, "I thought yuh was a goner for sure."

A crunch of flesh and bones comes from inside the store.

"Poor Two-gun!" Boo Boo murmurs. "Bein' et by a bear is likely worse'n bein' hung, and no mistake!"

"Serves the varmint right!" Six-hoss says unsympathetic. "Bustin' the best wooden leg I ever—"

At that moment, Two-gun staggers through the door. He is so scared he runs slap-dab into the hitchrack, knocking the wind from himself. Boo Boo has presence of mind enough to grab him, and Two-gun is not in no mood to resist.

"Save me!" he gasps. "Don't let that bear get me!"

That is when Mr. Truehart arrives, and hearing the crunch of flesh and bones inside the store, realizes that Matilda is once again at the meat counter. He rushes into the store, and with some

very strong language and a rope, leads Matilda from inside.

By now there is quite a crowd present, each and all gaping at Two-gun in Boo Boo's clutches. "Three cheers for our brave sheriff!" somebody says.

There follows much praiseful cheering, and Boo Boo looks happy indeed and shakes Two-gun violent just on general principles.

"I demand additional damages!" Nail-head yells above the turmoil. "That bear has upset my meat counter again!"

"This time," Mr. Truehart says, "yuh'll have to collect from the sheriff. It is his fault that Matilda escaped."

Now that both Matilda and Two-gun are safely captured, Boo Boo is not one to take nothing off nobody. He frowns severe and waggles a fat finger at Mr. Truehart very dangerous.

"One more word out of you," he says fierce, "and I will lock you up for good and all! Dig out yore money, Mr. Truehart, and start paying damages, or else!"

Mr. Truehart takes one look at Boo Boo's grim face and starts digging out money for damages. Boo Boo and I take Two-gun to jail and lock him in Matilda's old cell.

Just as we set down to rest, No-work Norton comes walking out of his cell, smiling dapper. "Sheriff," he says, "leave us find a checker board."

"I thought I locked you up?" Boo Boo roars.

"Yuh left the key in the lock," No-work explains.

Boo Boo ignores this. "Hopewell," he says, "I still can't understand why yuh didn't shoot Matilda."

"The only reason I didn't," I say, "is because them shells wouldn't shoot."

"What?" he says. "Why, that is funny peculiar! The ones No-work loaded went off."

"They should of," No-work says. "I loaded 'em with a extra heavy charge of gunpowder I found in a paper sack."

"Boo Boo," I say sad, "maybe yore mixture ain't so good."

He kicks my shin violent, and I say no more.

"What's this?" No-work murmurs, picking up Grandpappy Bounce's receipt. "Why," he says happy, "now I know what yuh're mixing up, Boo Boo. Yuh're gettin' ready to sugar-cure some hams."

"No such thing!" Boo Boo snorts. "I am making pow—"

"Yuh can't fool me," No-work grins. "This is a receipt for sugar-curin' hams. My own grandpappy used this same receipt when I was a boy. How well I recall it."

"No-work," Boo Boo bellows, "put down that receipt an' get back into yore cell!"

Not liking Boo Boo's fierce look, No-work does so. At that moment, who should come in but Forty-rod Frye.

"Have yuh heard the latest?" he says. "Miss Twiddle an' that Truehart jasper are goin' to get hitched. Seems she's goin' with him to help sell Doctor Big-chief Rattlesnake Ringle's Tonic, good for man or—"

"Forty-rod," Boo Boo mumbles, "kindly depart and shut the door gentle on yore way out."

After Forty-rod departs, a sad, heavy silence falls about Boo Boo and I.

At last, I venture somewhat timid, "It is too bad about Miss Twiddle and the high explosive, Boo Boo, but you still have Two-gun Grogan to be thankful for."

All of a sudden, Boo Boo smiles cheerful.

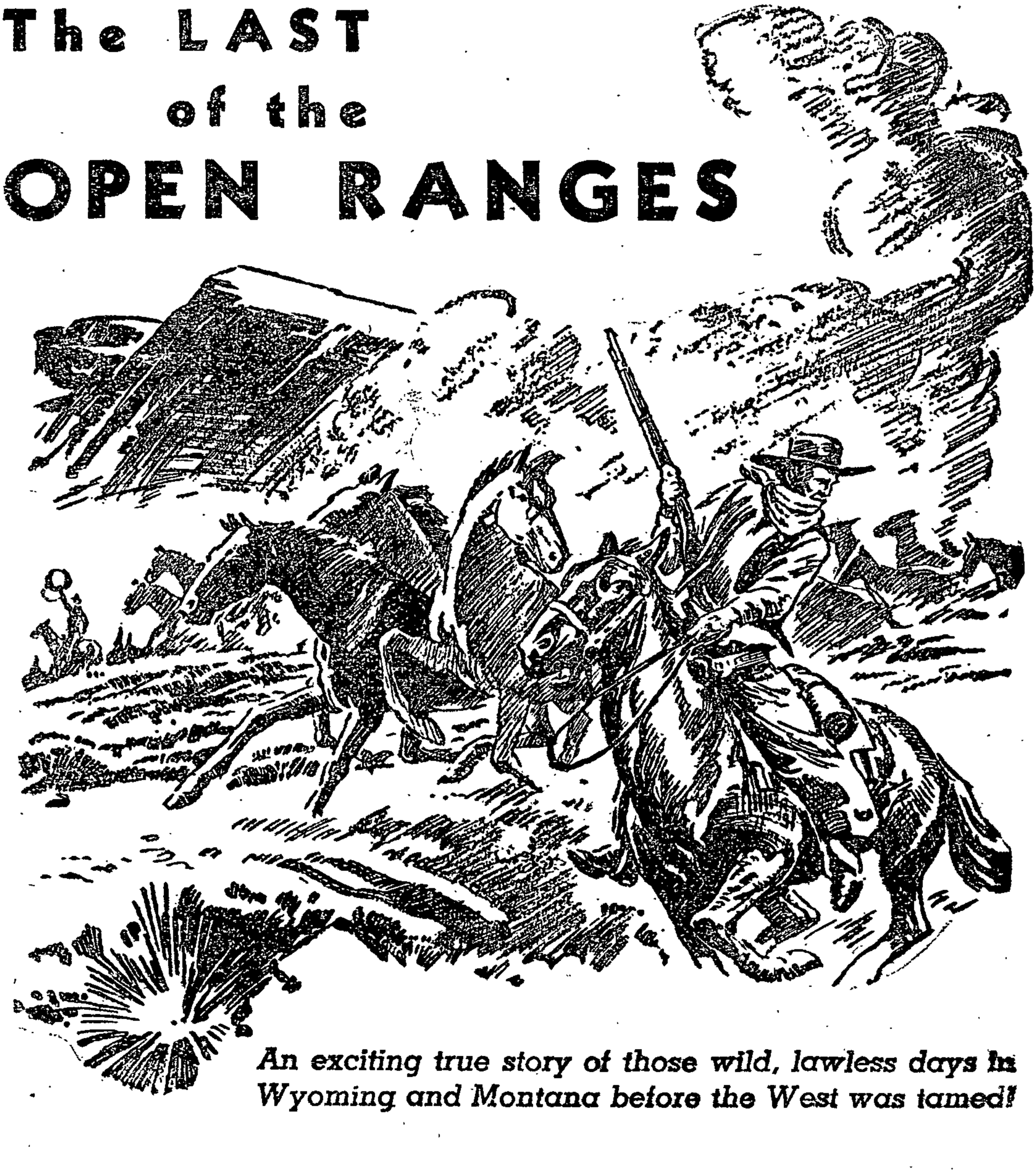
"Hopewell," he says, "I plumb forgot I captured Two-gun. On second thought, I can see a ray of sunshine in my life, for I can continue to be sheriff without no worries. And on third thought, I realize that being a millionaire and married would likely keep me awake nights worrying and spoil my appetite. In short, leave us say that all has happened for the best."

"True," I say. "And speaking of appetites, we might sugar-cure us some hams."

"Hopewell," Boo Boo says shuddery, "leave us never, never mention Grandpappy's receipt again. In fact, leave us forget the matter entirely, for I would not care for old man Bundy to learn how I tried to make high explosive out of a ham sugar-cure. Hopewell, to help yuh forget, here is a five-dollar bonus for yore assistance in capturing Two-gun Grogan."

"Thank you," I say, taking the five-spot; and already I realize I am forgetting and thinking only how nice it is to work for such a fine, intelligent gentleman as Boo Boo Bounce, and no mistake!

The LAST of the OPEN RANGES



An exciting true story of those wild, lawless days in Wyoming and Montana before the West was tamed!

by FREDERICK R. BECHDOLT

IN the fine big years before sheep and barbed-wire fences began to desecrate Wyoming's open ranges there was a cowboy by the name of Mike Burnet in the Wind River country, and he went wrong. The old-timers who tell the story say that he was a likable young fellow and honest at the bottom, but cowtown whisky and the hard-eyed women of the dance-halls got the best of him. So he drifted into the company of those riders who "threw a long rope," as the

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saying goes, and we find him with another rustler who called himself Spencer driving a band of stolen horses into the Territory from Montana.

Southward they came to Wind River and took the Sheridan Trail, which still spans Wyoming, linking the Black Hills to eastern Idaho. For winter was approaching and they had decided to hold up the herd in Jackson's Hole until next spring.

They were not the first horse-thieves who had arrived at that decision. Long before their time Jackson's Hole had gained an ill name among the stockmen of five commonwealths. There are three entrances: by Teton Pass from Idaho, and from the Wyoming side by Union and Two Ocean passes. The traveler who comes by any one of them is visible for miles; nor can he reach the floor without passing through rocky ravines which one man could hold against a hundred.

So in years gone by other armed riders had sought refuge from pursuit here and fattened their stolen horses on the grassy flats until the hue and cry died down.

However, those times were past when Mike Burnet and Spencer made their camp and turned out the stolen herd to graze not many miles from where the town of Kelly stands today. A new group of settlers was occupying Jackson's Hole. They were hard-working men who did a little ranching and trapped between times; they had no dealing with the rustlers. Pierce Cunningham was one of them; his place was further up the valley, a cabin, stable, and some excellent hay land. When the first snow began flying and all signs presaged a hard winter, the two visitors sought him out.

Horse-Thieves Buy Hay

They offered Cunningham a good price for his hay. He did not know the animals; the Montana brands were strange to him; the possessors told a plausible story of purchase. If he cherished any suspicions he put them by and yielded to their pleadings.

Now Mike Burnet and Spencer settled down in the rancher's cabin to wait for the coming of spring. Some time later Pierce Cunningham departed to the lower end of the valley where he had a chance to earn a little money.

The months went by. Then the settlers down at the southern end of Jackson's Hole found their life's routine interrupted by the arrival of four travelers who had crossed the Teton Pass from Idaho.

They were a hard-bitten quartet, and they came fully armed. Any one with half an eye could see that they were here on urgent business. They made it known that they were deputy sheriffs from Montana on the trail of a band of stolen horses.

Times had changed. The settlers of Jackson's Hole now were law-abiding men. And so, to make a long story short, Pierce Cunningham, Robert Miller, and Frank Peterson joined forces with the posse.

They made the journey to Cunningham's ranch on snow-shoes. Two of the Montanans slipped up to the building and entered it while the rest of the party lay behind the crest of a low ridge that commanded the whole place.

It was just about sunrise when the door of the cabin opened and Spencer appeared with his forty-five slung at his side. When he reached the corral something or other roused his suspicions. His hand dropped toward his revolver.

Then one of the pair in the barn called out, "Hands up"; and Spencer pulled his gun. He never fired. A bullet caught him fairly between the eyes, and he fell upon his face in the corral.

The sound of the shot brought Mike Burnet from the room where he was busy making breakfast.

"I'll never give myself up," he cried; "You'll have to get me like you did Spencer." The besiegers answered his defiance with a volley, but before they slew him he managed to kill one of the Montanans who had raised his head above the summit of the ridge to get a better shot at him.

In this manner Mike Burnet died; and the men from Montana drove the stolen horses away from Jackson's Hole. The settlers saw them depart over Teton Pass and went on about their business. Springtime passed and summer came. One day the truth drifted into the valley. They learned that those whom they had helped on that tragic morning were not officers. Nor were they the owners of the stolen horses. In brief they were horse-thieves themselves.

In those days the large outfits lay in

the plains and lower foothills country. Their ranges reached into the mountains. Here, where water was plentiful and feed grew waist high, homesteaders were appearing. They built their cabins, and they fenced their claims. And every strand of barbed wire did just so much more toward hampering the movements of the range-cattle. From the beginning the nester and the stockman disliked each other cordially.

Settlers Keep Mouths Shut

The cattle-rustlers and the horse-thieves made most of their forays on the herds of the big outfits. It was natural that the settlers should not be greatly concerned over the increase of this stealing from those who were trying to crowd him out of the country; and he became less investigative when he realized that the thieves or their friends would be sure to ride by his place again.

This attitude on the part of the settlers made it possible for horse-stealing and stock-rustling to grow to the large proportions they attained in the Eighties and early Nineties.

Of these two illicit industries the horse-stealing held the greater appeal to bold spirits. The days when a bunch of men could swoop down on a herd of cattle and drive away two hundred at a single raid had vanished.

Rustling cows meant brand-altering and was a comparatively slow process. But horses moved swiftly, and it was still possible to take them from their owners in big bands; to drive them fast and far until one found some hiding-place where he could rest them. So, of the lawless element who were drifting into Wyoming during the early Eighties, the abler and more daring members identified themselves with the horse-thief gangs.

Their operations extended over a period of about twelve years. Toward the last there came into existence a sort of hidden organization whose influence reached throughout Wyoming, Utah, Idaho, Montana, and Colorado. There was, for a time, an underground railway by which the stolen animals were shifted from State to State. In after years men called it the Old Outlaw Trail. Really it was no trail at all but consisted of a dozen different rendezvous like Jackson's Hole in any one of which a man acquainted with the combination could hide out and hold up his herd so long as he deemed it advisable.

These places did not all appear at once, but grew into being one by one through the necessities of local gangs. All of them had certain common characteristics. One of these was the strategic advantage which each gave its occupants over pursuers. The approaching rider was always visible for miles and sooner or later was sure to find himself at the mercy of the men who had been watching him.

These men—there were seldom less than two of them, and there were often half a dozen about the place—were not always active horse-thieves. But they were willing to take over a band of stolen animals and pasture them until the proper time came, when they would drive them on to another stopping-place or move them to the market. And they were always ready to ride to the nearest town for cartridges, provisions, whisky, or information.

If you have not read Owen Wister's "Virginian"—which is unlikely if you love the Old West—you can become intimately acquainted with these types by knowing *Steve and Trampas*. Such men as they drove bunches of stolen horses to these rendezvous year after year. There they met others of their breed, and those of them who were still fresh in lawlessness grew more seasoned in bad company.

Hole-In-Wall Famous

So it was that different sections got their bunches of horse-thieves and their hiding-places whose locations were an open secret, yet they were never visited by honest men or posses.

The Hole-in-the-Wall was perhaps the most famous of these spots after Jackson's Hole became law-abiding. It was a granite canyon in the eastern slope of the Big Horn Mountains not many miles from the town of Buffalo, Wyoming. Some distance above its narrow mouth the ravine opened to a flat where there was room for fields and pasture. There was but one way to enter, and, although many of the accounts which have been written were sadly overdrawn, there is no doubt that there were times when no sheriff's posse could have survived the passage of the steep-walled gap to reach the little basin where the settlers' cabins stood.

The Lost Cabin country in north central Wyoming was less known; but although it got nc fame in print the place saw its full share of wild goings-on.

Down in the country of the Orange Cliffs, south of Green River, Utah, was the Robbers' Roost. It occupied the top of a lofty mesa, and the man who wanted to gain this refuge must go to a little adobe building on a hillside half a day's journey distant; Horse-Thief Brown's Cabin was the name the structure went by. There he must wait for nightfall; then build three fires, which he was to blanket—each in its proper turn and for the proper time. The band who used the Roost at this period had their own standards of membership.

These were typical way-stations on the outlaw trail. But they were never really linked together until the late Eighties, when the so-called Wild Bunch came into being. How many men there were in this loosely organized band it would be hard to say; the number varied from time to time. Among the more prominent members were the Curry brothers, Butch Cassidy, Bob Leigh, Harry Lonabaugh, Camella Hanks, and Ben Kirkpatrick. The last two came up from Texas. Cassidy was a Utah product. The Curry boys, who took the name of Logan, hailed from Missouri but had wandered over a good deal of the West before they drifted into outlawry. None of this list belonged to the breed of the local horse-thieves who were making life a burden for the big cattlemen. They were what you mi.;ht call men of parts. Most of them graduated into train- and bank-robbery before they were done.

By 1889 there were two or more members of this outfit in the neighborhood of every one of the different rendezvous. For three or four years they kept busy at horse-stealing, shifting the looted bands from place to place.

How many horses traveled over sections of this Outlaw Trail has never been known. But old-timers in the Wind River country tell of seeing two hundred going by in a bunch. And there is a good deal back of the statement of the Wyoming cattlemen that the horse-thieves were threatening to put them out of business by the year 1890. At that time the general attitude of hostility to the big cowmen had reached a pitch where it was well nigh impossible to get juries who would convict the criminals when they were caught.

Rustling On Increase

That was the condition so far as horses were concerned when the thing came to its ugly climax. But there was another and perhaps an even graver element in the situation. Cattle-rustling had grown to enormous proportions.

Coincident with the appearance of the settlers, which has been described, came the advent of absent owners. Everybody was going to make a fortune out of beef. The old-style cow-man began disappearing; many of the large outfits passed into the hands of corporations. The responsibility of handling them was given to general managers. It was a case of producing dividends for stockholders, who could not have understood the effect of changing range conditions on the business if it had been explained to them.

And the change in those range conditions was great. The barbed-wire fences enclosing the settlers' fields were raising havoc in most sections. Once you interfere with a cow's accustomed routine, the animal seems to lose what semblance of sense it ever had. At the same time the range was being overstocked. Which further complicated matters.

Right then and there trouble began. There was some rough work. Fences were cut. Settlers were driven out of the country. It occurred only in a few places, but it roused wide-spread hostility among the homesteaders, and that feeling was shared by many who were in neither the cattle nor the farming business.

By 1885 rustling was being carried on all over Wyoming to an extent which threatened profits seriously. And profits, as has been said, were being even more seriously menaced by the constriction of the range. Lack of efficiency on the part of many managers helped the thing along. Some men had taken to selling feeders to produce the usual yearly dividends, which further depleted the herds.

It was natural enough that the settler should be blamed for all of this.

Some sections of the State—for the trouble came to a head after 1890 when Wyoming was admitted to the Union—

were worse than others. In Johnson County, which then occupied four times the area it now does, stockmen asserted that their losses reached ten thousand head. There is reason to believe that figure was not far from the truth.

In brief the foregoing is a history of horse-stealing and cattle-rustling, together with the attitude of the settlers that had much to do with making their growth possible. It was in 1892 that the big stockmen took their final measures. But, in order fairly to judge their frame of mind when they made that hideous mistake, it is just as well to follow their fight against the lawlessness from the beginning.

As the primitive pioneer days passed and the courts began to appear, the cowmen genuinely tried to get justice through the legal channels. But jury trials always depend more or less on the state of public feeling, and, for the reasons that have been outlined, the cowmen were unpopular. In every county seat there was at least one criminal lawyer who made a specialty of rustling cases; and you can depend on it that he knew nearly every prospective talesman in the district.

The sheriff was facing big odds from the start; for he had to catch his man, and, to do it, he usually was obliged to contend against a country-side whose populace were more anxious to help the fugitive than they were to aid the law. Once a thief was in custody, the prosecution was well nigh impotent for the simple reason that the defense was bound to slip in at least two or three jurors who would never return a verdict of guilty, no matter what the evidence.

Juries Always Freed Outlaws

In Lander, so old-timers say, there was a period of three or four years during which scores of thieves were tried and not one conviction attained—until the lawyers themselves got weary of the whole business, and several of the local rustlers went to prison by a sort of common consent. In Johnson County out of 108 cases tried in four years there was not a single verdict of guilty. The law was dead so far as rustling was concerned.

By 1889 the larger ranch-owners were getting desperate.

When men have reached that pitch they are very likely to make blunders. It was in 1889 that ten cattlemen rode up to Jim Averill's home on the Sweetwater. He ran a little store and sold some whisky. But the establishment was better known as "Cattle Kate's place." She lived in a little lean-to beside the store, and many men came to visit her. The stockmen asserted that lawless cowboys gave her stolen calves in payment for her wares, and that the place was nothing more nor less than a roadhouse to shelter rustlers. When the ten visitors departed from the cabin that night, they left behind them the bodies of the man and the woman hanging to a cottonwood.

Hanging women never was popular anywhere. The lynching aroused a storm of resentment. In the meantime the cattlemen aggravated matters still further by hiring a number of so-called detectives, who set about to exterminate the thieves.

That was the beginning of the Johnson County War.

During the fall of 1890 eight or ten cattlemen's association detectives were busy gathering evidence in the northeastern part of the State, until they had a list of about one hundred persons who they alleged were either stock-thieves or active accomplices. It was a dangerous task, and the men who carried it out were cool hands; there is no doubt of that.

High on the list of the accused were the names of Tom Waggoner and Nate Champion. Waggoner had come up from Nebraska several years since and gone into the horse business not far from the town of Newcastle. His place was south of the Belle Fourche River, right in the heart of the neighborhood where the Old Outlaw Trail has its eastern terminus. In June, 1891, three cattle association detectives went to his home one evening with a fraudulent warrant and took him forth on the pretext that they were arresting-officers. A week later a passing rider found his body hanging to a tree in a gulch a few miles distant.

At dawn on a November morning of that same year four of these detectives tried to get Champion in very much the same manner. He was a Texas man, and he had come into the Powder River country with a trailherd in the early Eighties.

The quartet who came to lynch him found him that cold autumn morning in the cabin of a man by the name of Hall on Powder River. Champion and Ross Gilbertson were asleep when the posse threw open the door. They rushed in with their six-shooters leveled.

"Give up," one of them shouted; "we've got you this time."

Champion Defeats Posse

With that the shooting began. Champion's guns were under his pillow, but he had them both out and in action so quickly that the two foremost members of the lynching-party went out of commission after firing one shot apiece. They fell back through the doorway, wounded, both of them; and their companions helped them away to the nearest shelter.

Within the month young Ranger Jones was slain from ambush while he was driving in a buckboard at the crossing of Muddy Creek, not far from Buffalo; and J. A. Tisdale was shot down from behind two mornings later near the Cross H ranch in the same neighborhood.

How closely these last two were identified with the active rustlers has never been established; there is no doubt in the mind of the average man as to Champion and Waggoner. But all four were well liked by the settlers, and the local authorities were hostile to the cowmen.

And, in fairness to the settlers, one must remember that they believed—not without cause, either—the cattlemen were starting a campaign to drive them out of the country.

The cattlemen had the state government, and, through senatorial influence in Washington, they had the ear of President Harrison. With these forces to back them, they set about it to raise a company that should drive the stock-thieves—and the small settlers—from the State forever.

So their agents went forth and hired men in Texas, Idaho, and Colorado, the sort of men whom one could get for such purposes in those times. Most of them were killers and ready to hire out for five dollars a day without asking questions.

On April 5, late in the afternoon, the passenger-train pulled into Cheyenne with a special coach whose window-shades were tightly drawn. The car was shunted into a siding down by the stock-yards, and its passengers disembarked. There were nearly thirty of them, and the majority had come from Texas. None among the number but called himself a gunman; and there were some whose reputations as killers bore out the assertion.

Here at the shipping-pens they met another breed. Cowboys from the larger ranches, stock-growers who had spent years on Wyoming ranges along the Powder River had been busy for the past three days branding and loading saddle-horses, preparing wagon-outfits, sorting out bedding, and making ready for the expedition. The laden stock-cars were coupled to the passenger-coach; the train started on for Casper bearing some of the best men in the Northwest—and some of the Southwest's poorest riffraff.

They reached Casper late in the night. Before the sun had risen they had saddled up and started forth into the north. Buffalo was their ultimate destination. Forty miles out, at Tisdale's ranch, Mike Shonsy, foreman of the Western Union Beef Company, met them with word that Nate Champion, king of the Johnson rustlers, was camped with one or two companions on the North Fork of Powder River. The main body was held here while scouts went forward to locate the party and learn their strength.

Party Surrounds Cabin

On the afternoon of the eighth the scouts came back with word that the wanted man and his partner, Nick Ray, were in a cabin at Nolan's K C ranch. The expedition set out after nightfall, and before the break of dawn they had the place surrounded.

The light grew along the summits of the hills. The cabin door opened, and a man with a bucket walked down to the creek. The nearest gunmen covered him from their ambuscade, and he obeyed their quiet order to give himself up. He proved to be a freighter by the name of Jones, and he said that his partner, one Walker, was in the house; they had spent the night there. Some minutes passed. Then another man appeared.

"That's Jim," Jones told his captors, "my pardner." They let him walk down to the stable where he was taken. The

sun was rising now. Its first rays were bathing the slope before the cabin when the door opened for the third time and Champion's partner, Nick Ray, came forth. He started slowly down the path toward the barn. When he had gone perhaps a dozen paces a rifle cracked by the creek. He pitched forward and lay quite still.

Then Nate Champion showed himself. Rifle in hand, he sprang from the inner darkness to the patch of sunlight that had just fallen upon the threshold. A dozen smoke-puffs appeared by the creek bank; the cracks in the stable's chinking emitted little clouds of white. To the rattle of the shots his Winchester made answer. He fired four times and leaped back into the room.

The noise seemed to have roused Nick Ray from his stupor, for he came crawling slowly up the pathway. When he was within a yard of the threshold he sank down again and remained motionless. The door flew open. Champion ran out, picked up the limp form in his arms, and bore it back into the cabin, while the bullets kicked up little spurts of dust all around him.

The rattle of rifles kept up intermittently all that morning and through the noon hour. At intervals Champion fired back through one of the windows. He was a dead shot; there was no man in the ring around the place who dared to show his head so long as they knew that he was living. So he stood them off, while Nick lay dying in the room; and in the middle of the afternoon a thing happened that turned the tide of the whole Johnson County war.

A settler by the name of Jack Flagg, with his young stepson, was traveling down the road which pased the cabin. The boy was driving a span of horses hitched to the running-gear of a lumber-wagon; and the man rode a little distance behind on a good saddle-horse. For some moments before their appearance the firing had ceased. So the two of them came right into the ring of the besiegers before they realized what was going on. Now the cattlemen knew that, if they would succeed, they must prevent any news of their advance from preceding them. So when they saw Flagg and the boy they called out to them to surrender. The youngster whipped up the horses. Flagg followed the wagon on the run.

A dozen of the Texan gunmen lined their sights to get them. By some strange fortune none of the bullets found their mark. Six of the besiegers leaped on their horses. The boy was still flogging the team, and they were making break-neck speed. Flagg sank his spurs into his pony's flanks, and as he overtook the wagon he shouted to the boy to hand him his rifle.

The pursuing party came into sight around a turn of the road just in time to see him bring the weapon to his shoulder. They did not wait to try conclusions with him but turned and raced back to safety; and so it came about that while Nate Champion was finishing his big fight Flagg rode on at top speed to spread the news of the invasion among the settlers.

The Siege Continues

The siege continued all that afternoon. As the sun was setting the men near the barn took an empty wagon and loaded it with pitch-pine. They touched a match, and four of them leaped behind the shelter of the blazing load. They pushed the heavy vehicle up to the cabin and ran for their lives.

The building was dry as tinder. In a few seconds it was a mass of flames. Now Champion came forth into the open. He ran toward the ravine; but before he had gone three quarters of the distance he fell with half a dozen bullets in his body. They searched his pockets, and they found in one of them a little note-book. A bullet-hole had perforated its pages mutilating the words that he had set down there during the progress of this last day of his life. Here is what he wrote:

Me and Nick was getting breakfast when the attack took place. Two men here with us—Bill Jones and another man. The old man went after water and did not come back. Nick started out and I told him to look out, that I thought there was some one at the stable and would not let them come back. Nick is shot but not dead yet. He is awful sick. I must go and wait on him.

It is now about two hours since the first shot. Nick is still alive; they are shooting and are all around the house. Boys, there is bullets coming in like hail. Them fellows is in such shape I can't get at them. They are shooting from the stable and from the river back of the house. Nick is dead. He died about nine o'clock. I see a smoke down at the stable. I think they have fired it. I don't think they intend to let me get away this time.

It is now about noon. There is some one at the stable yet; they are throwing a rope out at the door and drawing it back. I guess it is

to draw me out. I wish that duck would get out further so I could get a shot at him. Boys, I don't know what they have done with them two fellows that stayed here last night.

Boys, I feel pretty lonesome just now. I wish there was some one here with me so we could watch all sides at once. They may fool around until I get a good shot before they leave.

It is about three o'clock now. There was a man in a buckboard and one on horseback just passed. They fired on them as they went by. I don't know if they killed them or not. I seen lots of men come out on horses on the other side of the river and take after them. I shot at the men in the stable just now; don't know if I got any or not. I must go back and look out again. It don't look as if there is much show of my getting away. I see twelve or fifteen men. One looks like (this name was scratched out by some one who found the notebook). I don't know whether it is or not. I hope they did not catch them fellows that run over the bridge towards Smith's. If I had a pair of glasses I believe I would know some of those men. They are coming back. I've got to look out.

Well, they have just got through shelling the house like hail. I hear them splitting wood. I guess they are going to fire the house tonight. I think I will make a break when night comes, if alive. Shooting again. I think they will fire the house this time. It's not night yet. The house is all fired. Good-by, boys, if I never see you again.

Nathan D. Champion.

That night the cattlemen's forces started on toward Buffalo, sixty miles distant. They never got there. Twenty-two miles from the town a messenger met them with tidings that two hundred armed men were coming forth against them. Jack Flagg had given the alarm.

So they made a detour to the T A ranch in a bend of Crazy Woman's Fork twelve miles from the village; and here the settlers found them the next day.

They came from Buffalo, from Sheridan, and from a hundred cabins throughout the Powder River country. Old Arapaho Brown, a veteran of early-day Indian wars, was in command. He disposed them in a wide semi-circle along the crest of a ridge commanding the ranch buildings. For two days a constant rifle fire was kept up without any particular damage. Then Brown, who was old in rough-and-ready strategy, conceived the idea of a movable breastwork, erected on the running-gears of a stout lumber-wagon. The vehicle was loaded with giant-powder.

Behind the barricade of logs a dozen men could find shelter while they shoved it forward toward the house. But just at this juncture three troops of cavalry from Fort McKinney appeared on the scene. President Harrison had ordered them out in response to a telegraphic appeal from Acting Governor Amos W. Barber.

Troops Stop Feud

The settlers had the wagon with its fortification and its load of explosives ready when the troopers rode in over the ridge. Colonel J. J. Van Horn, who was in command of the detachment came on in advance with a white flag; and Sheriff Angus of Johnson County, who had joined the settlers with a posse of twelve men, rode out to meet him. Angus demanded that the members of the cowmen's forces be turned over to him as prisoners.

The demand was not granted. The captives were taken in charge by the military, but later they were given to the county authorities. All of them were released on bonds. Within a few months the Texans and the other outside gunmen left the State; and when the cattlemen appeared for trial the cases were never pressed.

But the stockmen were beaten. Public opinion was hot against them all over the Northwest. The wiser ones among them saw that the days of the open range were virtually gone, and took their herds to other states. Some went into business in Australia and the Argentine.

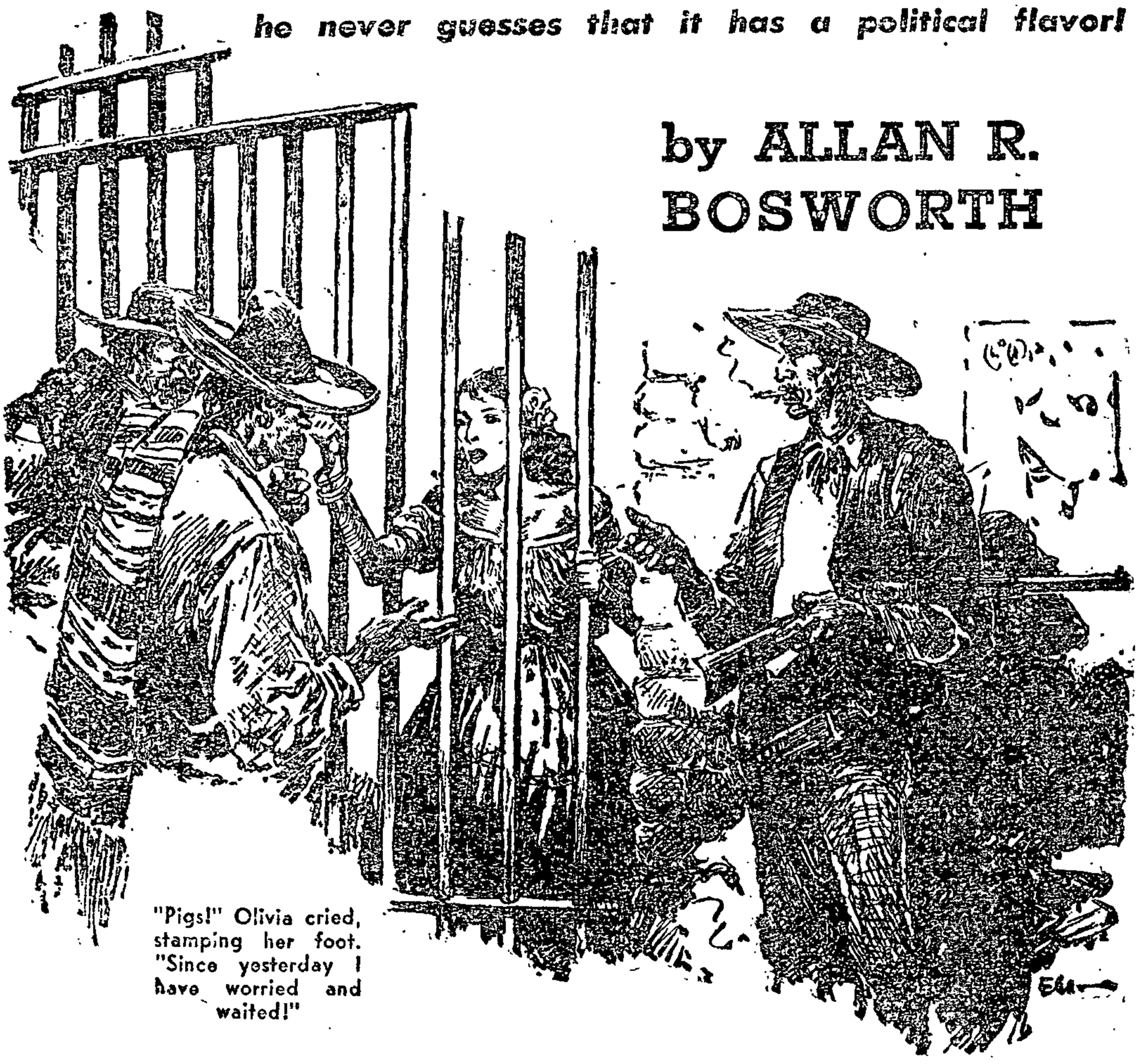
In 1900 the surviving cowmen were again defeated in an ill-advised war against the sheep-herders who had invaded their range. The fences of the settlers had become more numerous. Cowboy and rustler vanished. It was inevitable. Civilization had come, and the Old West was gone forever.

Were the buffalo herds a menace to the West? Did they have to go before progress could be made? Read the answer in THE BUILDING OF THE WEST, a special true feature by JOHN EDWARD DALTON which will appear next issue!

When Tacho Gonzales concocts a lotus-dream drink he never guesses that it has a political flavor!

MUSIC in the AFTERNOON

by ALLAN R. BOSWORTH



"Pigs!" Olivia cried, stamping her foot. "Since yesterday I have worried and waited!"

TACHO GONZALES lay abed, a thing he had done well for sixty years. When Olivia looked his way through the open door, he pretended sleep; at other times he watched her fondly. She moved about her kitchen, soft and yet substantial. There was an abundance of her in all the proper places, and yet one would not say that she was fat. In the eyes of Tacho Gonzales, his daughter was more beautiful than the morning.

"Like her mother," he thought, and was sad. Not because Olivia would be married tomorrow if her Juan returned with the shearing crew, but because he had nothing to give her as a dowry. He could not even buy her a veil, and a wreath of artificial orange blossoms to catch it on her shining black hair.

He sighed, exploring the depths of that poverty, and then Olivia suddenly descended upon him in wrath.

"*Papacito!*" she exclaimed. "Do you think this is your birthday?" Her speech, half of Mexico and half of Texas, was sometimes hard to understand. "Get

up, before I bring the broom! Do you imagine that you are Juan D. Rockefeller?"

Tacho Gonzales sighed again. He had only to put on his shoes and throw a *serape* over his shoulder, and he was dressed.

"You have mentioned this Juan D. Rockefeller before," he said. "He is your boss at the pecan packing plant?"

Olivia poured coffee. "Of course not. He is *muy, muy rico*. Look. Every time you buy kerosene for the lamp, you are putting money into his pocket."

"He is more rich than the Senor Murphy, then?" Tacho Gonzales pursued.

"Ha! Compared to him, Murphy is a peon. Besides, Juan D. Rockefeller gives his money to good things. He gives it to hospitals and schools and libraries."

Tacho considered this. "When I have sold this drink I have invented," he said, "I, too, will do good things with my money. Look. Every time a man buys my drink, he will be putting money into my pocket. You and Juan Ordonez shall have everything you desire. You shall have—"

"You are talking fiddlesticks!" said Olivia. "And besides, that drink could easily turn into an evil thing. As you well know, you do not have a license to distill it, in the first place. If you were not so lazy, you would forget the drink, and get a job!"

SHE hastily drank her coffee and was gone out past the morning-glories on the porch, and through the sagging gate. Tacho Gonzales sat thinking. He had been making the drink for several years—the goat shed behind the house was stacked high with bottles of it. So far, nobody had come to tell him its manufacture was against the law, but then perhaps that was because nobody knew about it.

Still, if there was money in kerosene, there should be much more in the sale of a liquor that could make a man hear music. He drank another cup of coffee, and thought of tomorrow's wedding. And then he concealed a bottle from the goat shed under his *serape*, and took his purposeful way toward Murphy's saloon.

Tacho was not long up from Mexico, a small and wrinkled man well seasoned by *chills*, grave and courteous, and a child in many things. He loved leisure, and this was half a lifetime ago, when leisure could be loved with impunity.

When he came to the meeting of Bowie and Alamo Streets, not paved in those days, the white border dust was blinding, and a monumental lassitude climbed his back. But he went resolutely past the cottonwood that shaded the wooden sidewalk in front of the Lone Star Saddle Shop, and crossed the street there.

The saloon he entered humbly, hat in hand. Murphy owned it, and the pecan packing plant, and the laundry. Murphy owned half the town, and there were placards in the saloon windows crying "Murphy for Mayor."

That was Murphy seated at a table in the back of the place, chewing hard on an unlighted cigar. He was a heavy man with massive red jowls and small eyes, and the coldness of him made Tacho Gonzales feel like shivering.

"What do you want?" he grunted over a stack of papers.

Tacho brought forth the bottle as a man reveals a precious and cherished secret.

"Senor," he said politely, "I have invented a drink. It is made from the juices of the *sotol* and the *maguey*, and the fruit of the *pitahya* kissed by the sun. It is sweetened with honey from the bloom of the *huajilla*."

"Not interested," Murphy said.

"But, senor, it could make us rich. One drink of this bottle, and a man hears music."

"Not interested, I told you. I've got an election to worry about. Get out!"

The sombrero of Tacho Gonzales turned heavy in his hand.

"Will you not taste it once, as a favor to me?" he asked.

"Get out, curse you!" Murphy said, his jowls darkening.

"With your permission," sighed Tacho.

In the sun-blazed street, he turned to the rustling shade of the cottonwood. The saddle shop's adobe wall was ancient, with depressions worn to fit weary shoulders, and many things took place at this corner. All the town's dogs came here to carve their initials on the tree trunk, and they could easily be persuaded to fight. Freight wagons jingled by with wool for the warehouses at Del Rio or Eagle Pass or San Antonio, and

once in awhile a drunk was thrown from Murphy's saloon.

Besides all this, Felipe Vargas was already here, sitting on the small of his back with a sombrero over his face to make the flies miserable. Some days, Felipe peddled tamales from a five-gallon lard can which he pulled in a battered little red wagon, but he owned five burros and a cow, and did not have to work. Tacho had been sitting beside him for several minutes before Felipe lifted his sombrero to see who had come.

"*Viejo,*" he said, although he was as old as Tacho himself.

The greeting left implied wishes for a good afternoon, excellent health, and the blessings of all the saints. In return, Tacho lifted one corner of his despondent white mustache, and the demands of courtesy had been satisfied.

But Felipe Vargas was studying him. "You have troubles?" he asked.

Tacho carefully put the bottle on the sidewalk between them, hesitating to tell Felipe the nature of his financial worries. It was a little thing—a veil of white lace, a wreath of orange blossoms. Felipe would not understand.

"I am only wondering," Tacho said. "Wondering if the shearing crew will return in time for my daughter to marry Juan Ordonez."

"But what is a day, when there is a lifetime before them?" Felipe asked. "And what is in this bottle, Tacho?"

"Ha!" Tacho said. "Nothing of value. Only dreams, and music, and neither can be sold. But taste it, *amigo,* as a favor to me."

FELIPE pulled the cork and tasted. Then he tilted the bottle and drank.

"It is excellent," he said. "Better, even, than *aguardiente.* Let me try it again." He drank again. "Listen, *viejo!* Do you hear music?"

"And Senor Murphy would not believe!" Tacho muttered. He took a hasty pull at the bottle, and the drink warmed him inside. Then he heard the martial strains himself. "It is the drink, Felipe! I have a fortune in this bottle!"

"It is a band," Felipe Vargas said, wiping his lips on the back of his hand. "This must be some feast day of the *Americanos,* and it finds me without tamales to sell. I must speak sharply to my wife!"

It was indeed a band, waking the sleeping white dust as it swung into view six blocks down Alamo Street. Tacho Gonzales drained the bottle, chagrined at discovering that the music did not come out of it, but quickly forgetting his disappointment in the mounting excitement. Now he saw the ripple of banners advancing with the music. There were outsiders in gay *charro* costumes, and boys and dogs running into the street, and women pulling smaller children out of the path of the procession.

Shouts of "*Viva!*" floated on the air. The sun was brave on brass horns, and drums quickened the pulses, and Tacho saw a growing straggle of men following the band, other riders in the rear.

Heat and dust were suddenly gone, and with them that drowsiness of siesta time and the rustle of wind in the cottonwood leaves. Flags went by. The band blared "*Adelita.*" A sombrero sailed skyward, and in all these things was that to make a man forget his years and become a happy little child again. Before Tacho Gonzales knew it, he was in the procession, and not at all surprised to find Felipe Vargas marching at his side.

The band halted in front of Murphy's saloon, playing "*La Cucaracha.*" More men came running. More hats flew exuberantly into the air. The outriders turned up Bowie Street.

"*Viva!*" shouted Felipe. "*Viva Mexico! Viva Estados Unidos!*"

Tacho Gonzales felt a catch at his heart. He was not sure of the name, so he shouted two of them.

"*Viva* Taft—*Viva* Wilson!"

Then there was a short, sharp scuffle up front, where the band collided with another band and procession. Somebody pulled a post loose and left the wooden awning sagging in front of the Two Republics Café. When Tacho and Felipe passed this place, they saw a man sitting on the sidewalk with his nose bleeding, and they embraced each other out of happiness.

It was a mile farther before curiosity overtook Tacho Gonzales.

"I have not been long in this country," he said apologetically to the man on his left. "Why do we march today?"

"*Viva!*" the man shouted, and then looked at Tacho. "Why, indeed!" he said. "It is the election. You have joined the *Viboros* party."

"Viboros?" Tacho echoed. "Since I came here, I have heard of the *Republicanos,* and that other party—the one riding the mule. To which belongs the *Viboros?"*

The other shrugged. "How can one know? Those other *musicos* were of the *Lobos.* Last election I voted with them. But it is well known that the *Viboros* have more to eat and drink in their corral. *Viva Viboros!"*

"And is all this free?" Tacho marveled.

"Of course. One does not vote with the empty stomach."

They marched on, and Tacho was thinking that the customs of the country were wonderful, indeed. The procession had grown magnificently, until he saw that the ranks of the *Viboros* were swelled to at least two hundred men, and his heart grew large with pride. Then Felipe plucked his sleeve.

"The shearing crew," he said, pointing.

True enough, there was the long wagon with its flat tarpaulin shade, and its system of belts and pulleys that operated the sheep clippers. And watching the parade in open-mouthed admiration was a tall young man with a long nose and fierce black eyes.

Tacho broke away from the group, though an outrider tried to drive him back.

"Juan, *hijo!"* he called joyfully. "Come with us! Come to the corral of the *Viboros* to eat and drink!"

JUAN started away from the wagon, then hesitated. Something about his bearing suggested that he was not a man easily led.

"No," he said. "The wedding."

"But that is manana. This is the election. Come with us, Juan!"

Juan Ordonez swallowed, and became a *Viboro.* A little farther, and the band turned into the gate of a high-walled patio, its music resounding loudly from a long Spanish-type building set against the farther side. Here the band played one number, and then filed through the house and was gone, and outriders and banners vanished with it.

All this was strange, but Tacho smelled goat meat being barbecued over coals of mesquite wood, and yonder were men handing out bottles of beer with great carelessness, while others ladled *frijoles* into tin plates. It was Juan Ordonez who pulled him aside and pointed to an iron gate that had been swung shut at the entrance, and to a man who stood there with a .30-.30 under his arm.

"What is this?" Juan asked darkly. "Have we been tolled into this place like sheep behind a Judas goat? Tomorrow, remember, is my wedding day."

"But that is tomorrow," Tacho said patiently. "I do not know all the customs of this country, but I will ask. There will be some simple explanation for everything."

"I want to hear it," Juan said, and went along until Tacho had found the man to whom he had talked earlier.

"Yes, it is simple, indeed," said the latter. "Those *Lobos* are not to be trusted. They have been recruited to vote for the Senor Parker, who is not much of anybody and cannot win this election. They will steal every voter in this corral if they have a chance, and will prepare the ballots for them just as the Senor Murphy is doing for us. Now you can understand why it is necessary that the guard with the *treinte-treinte* stays there until the election, the day after tomorrow."

"Day after tomorrow?" exclaimed Juan Ordonez. *"Dios mio!* Are we to stay here until then?"

"Of course. The band has gone out to get more voters, and that takes time. But is there reason to worry? Smell the barbecued meat. Observe the *frijoles* and the beer. Come, let us eat!"

What else could a man do? Juan Ordonez had gone to the gate, only to be turned back by the sentry, who said he had orders to shoot. It was difficult to understand this, but then Tacho pointed out that if one adopts a country as his own, he must embrace its customs.

"Look," he told Juan. "There might be spies present. From what I am told of this man Parker, who is the head of the *Lobos,* he would give much to know how many voters we have in this corral. And I have heard that the *Lobos* are assembled only a mile to the northward, in the old Verimendes place."

"What do I care?" Juan growled. "I am thinking of the marriage. They will not let me go even to tell Olivia where I am. I will not stay here!"

But first there was food, and then excitement. Another fifty voters were brought in. Some of those already there

had too much beer, and there were four separate fist fights, so that even Juan Ordonez enjoyed himself. And then Senor Murphy came to make a speech.

Tacho Gonzales himself did not understand all that Senor Murphy had to say, but enough was clear to make it plain that a desperate situation had arisen. The judicial district and the town, Senor Murphy said, were standing at the crossroads, although Tacho could not remember any such arrangement. Senor Murphy said there would be a *tamale* in every shuck if he carried the election.

"And if I lose," he went on, waving his arms wildly, "I predict that grass will soon be growing in the streets of our fair city!"

"Viva!" shouted Felipe Vargas. It must be remembered that he owned five burros and a cow.

After Senor Murphy had finished, some of his men wrote down the name of every man in the corral, and explained that ballots would be prepared for them to save them trouble. There was more feasting, and drinking, and a lot of bad singing. When Tacho observed how truculent Juan Ordonez looked, he carried no less than seven bottles of beer to the sentry.

But the man was made of iron, and had no bottom.

"It is of no use," Tacho said, wrapping himself in his *serape*. "We are here until after the election. It is the custom."

Juan Ordonez could not feel philosophical. He butted his head against the adobe wall, and beat it with his fists.

"I cannot stay!" he cried. "Olivia is of a jealous turn. She will think I have gone to another woman!"

Tacho pulled him down to the ground. "The bullet of the *treinte-treinte* is faster than you, my son," he said gently. "And the walls are high. Try to sleep."

SHOTS woke them in the night, and word went around that the *Lobos* had tried to steal voters by raiding the corral, but had been repulsed. Tacho dozed again, feeling some pride in the victory. When next he opened his eyes, the sun was in them, and the feasting and drinking had been resumed. In all the corral, nobody but Juan and himself desired to leave.

"Drink while you can!" advised the man who had marched with Tacho in the parade. "Tonight there will be none."

"And why not?" demanded Juan. "If we are to be held prisoners—"

"It is the custom," the other explained. "I have seen it through many elections. One must be sober when he goes to the polls."

Tacho embraced this custom as he had the others, but Juan only paced the patio like a caged cat, and twice the armed sentry had to warn him to stand back from the gate. A straggle of recruits came in, and the banners looked dirty and torn, and the band was tired. At sundown the sentry summoned Tacho and Juan.

It was Olivia, facing them through the iron grille, more angry than either had ever seen her. More beautiful, too, with her flashing black eyes and scornful lips.

"Pigs!" she exclaimed, stamping her foot. "Since yesterday I have wondered and worried and waited! Since noon the priest has been ready. But no—you are here, gorging yourselves, having *fiesta!* It makes no difference that I cry!"

She cried, and it made such a difference to Juan Ordonez that the sentry and two other men had to drag him away. Tacho tried the gate, but it was locked.

"I have done this to you and Juan," he told Olivia abjectly. "I did not know. There was the music, and I followed."

"You followed the music!" Olivia mimicked. "There is that about our people—let a band play, and they follow like sheep! Stupid, oh, stupid *papacito!* Not only are you here, but you have joined the wrong party! Did you not know that Senor Murphy is the *jefe politico* in this town because he is crooked? He takes what you call graft. He has plotted to get a contract to pave the streets, and there will be more graft. Oh, it is all arranged. I have heard the talk at the pecan packing plant, and I read the paper."

Tacho Gonzales considered this. How could grass grow in the streets if they were to be paved? It was plain that Senor Murphy was a liar. And he thought back on something Olivia had just said.

"'Let a band play, and they follow

like sheep,' " he repeated. "Is that true, my daughter?"

"Look about you!" Olivia said.

Tacho looked. They were struggling to hold Juan Ordonez, yonder, but the others were content, not knowing they had joined the wrong party. The others had followed the band.

"Look, my little one," he told Olivia. "Go to the house of Felipe Vargas and borrow two of his burros, and his burro cart. Drive it to our goat shed, and bring here all the bottles you find there. I will prove to you that this drink I have invented can be used for good. Quickly, now!"

He obtained Juan's release by explaining that it was only the sight of his *novia* that had made him violent. Then he took Juan and Felipe Vargas aside, and held a whispered consultation to prove that Senor Murphy was what you call crooked. The beer had run out, and this was not hard for Felipe to believe.

Then the time dragged. At midnight wheels creaked outside, and the sentry once more called them to the gate. Olivia handed a couple of bottles through the grille, and Tacho saw that she had recruited a driver from somewhere—a man huddled beneath *serape* and sombrero on the seat of the cart.

"A minute, there," said the sentry, who had been eyeing Olivia with appreciation. "It is not the custom to bring your own liquor to these affairs. It was never done at other elections."

"But Senor Murphy's supply has run out," said Tacho. "And this is some of my own making. It contains the juice of the *sotol*, and that of the *maguey*, and that of ripe *pitahya* fruit. It is sweetened with *huajilla* honey. Will you not taste it, as a favor to me?"

"I can see no harm in that," said the sentry. "Your permission, *senorita*."

He tilted the bottle, tucking the rifle under his arm. Tacho Gonzales never learned what the sentry thought of his drink, because at that point Juan Ordonez sprang upon him like a panther, and bore him to the ground, choking him into insensibility. It took only a minute to drag him into the concealment of shrubbery and find his keys.

THEN the burro cart creaked inside, and the bottles were passed around freely. Senor Murphy, worn out with his campaigning, was home sleeping the sleep of the sure victor. He could not hear Olivia as she mounted to the burro cart and made a speech:

"Paisanos!" she called. "Countrymen! Are you content to stay here when Senor Murphy has allowed food and drink to run out? Yonder in the Verimendes place there is a great plenty of both. It is a wedding feast for Juan Ordonez and me, and you are all invited. And are you sheep, to be told how you should vote?"

The driver of the cart sat hunched, saying nothing. It was Felipe Vargas, lowering his bottle, who suddenly shouted:

"Music!"

The others heard it, too, and Tacho's heart leaped with pride. It was necessary only for the driver to turn the burro cart out the gate, with Olivia standing in the back, abundant in all the pretty places, beautiful in the moonlight, beckoning them on.

Senor Murphy did not see three hundred and more voters start across the mesquite flat to the Verimendes place and the *Lobos* corral. But Tacho saw it, and marveled at what the juices of *sotol* and *maguey* and *pitahya* could do. He climbed into the cart, and drank of his own liquor, and heard the music, too.

And then he threw the bottle away. It was like Olivia had said. A drink like that, with the power to lure men on, might easily become a force for evil. Besides, Olivia was introducing him to the driver.

"Senor Parker," she said, "this is my father. He needs a job."

It was like that, and before Tacho Gonzales could say no, he had been promised a job under the new administration, helping to pave the streets and then to keep them in repair. Juan Ordonez also would have a job, and each would be paid a hundred dollars a month.

The music was plain, now. Tacho Gonzales never knew for certain whether it came out of the bottles, or whether it was the *Lobos* band playing for the wedding *fiesta*. The knowledge of having to work saddened him, and still, with a hundred dollars a month, he felt like Juan D. Rockefeller. He told himself that a man working for the new *alcalde* could not afford ever again to distill liquor illegally, and he was very, very glad that the election day did not come around every year.

by JOE PEARCE

as told to HAROLD PREECE

The exciting true adventures of an old-time lawman on the trail of bandits and killers!

I Rode with the ARIZONA RANGERS

I RODE with the Arizona Rangers when riding was hard. I wore Badge No. 13 and it brought me no ill luck.

Nor do I expect any bad luck from old enemies. They are all sleeping on the wooded hillsides of Arizona with their boots on.

I was born in an ox-powered covered wagon, somewhere along the Utah-Nevada line, September 4, 1873. I don't know which of these states can claim me as a native, so I guess I'm a foreigner. But I've had a few drinks from the Hassayama River in Arizona. And

that's the way you get naturalized in this state.

Today, there are only ten survivors out of the total of ninety men who rode with the Arizona Rangers during the eight years that great fighting force lasted. The Arizona Rangers were started to finish up the good work of their brother peace officers, the Texas Rangers.

The Texas Rangers had done a good job of chasing the cattle rustlers and all-round hard men out of the Lone Star State. But then the lawless hombres moved right over into Arizona. Cattle rustling, stagecoach holdups, train and bank robberies were becoming intolerable.

Rustlers would sweep down on the smaller ranches and cow spreads, stealing both cattle and horses. Arizona sheriffs were not prepared to answer the numerous calls to trail the outlaws down. Cattlemen, large and small, were screaming for help. Meanwhile, the Sombreros Grandes—the big-hatted Mexican outlaws from Chihuahua and Sonora—were cutting out steers from the flanks of the big herds along the Rio Grande. Cunning renegades among the American cowboys were working hand-in-hand with them to smuggle stock across the border.

Owlhoots Terrorize Country

Homesteaders were afraid to settle in the Territory, and we needed more people to get Arizona admitted into the Union. Governor Oakes Murphy decided to rid Arizona of its owlhoots once and for all. In 1901, the territorial legislature set up the Arizona Rangers with twelve men and a captain, and it was provided that the force could be doubled to twenty-five men if necessary. In a year's time, a full twenty-five were riding across mesas and canyons after the hard men.

After the killing of Ranger Carolos Tafoya at the fight with the notorious Smith brothers on Black River, I enlisted to fill the gap. When I first enlisted, there was no Ranger star for me and no number. But after a few months, Ranger Billy Webb resigned right after killing a trigger-happy outlaw by the name of Bass, kinfolk of Sam Bass who'd been wiped out by the Texas Rangers.

"Joe, are you superstitious?" my commander, Captain Thomas H. Rynning asked me one evening after Billy had gone.

"Don't know whether I am or not, Cap," I answered, not knowing how to figure his play.

"Well," he said. "Here's Billy Webb's badge—Number Thirteen. Shall I pin it on you?"

A few of the boys were standing around. "Don't take it," they said, shaking their heads.

"Wait till morning, Cap, and let me think it over," I stalled.

I'd heard so much about thirteen being a bad luck number that I was really spooky about having it tied on me. So that evening, I paced downtown and called on a lady who had her shingle hung out as one who could read your past and future.

I told her I had joined up with a gun-toting gang, handed her a buck and asked what she thought about my number. She gave me the once over, kind of laughed and said:

"My boy, there's nothing to the old English idea that the train wreck was caused by a black cat walking across the track. And nothing that's attached to number thirteen can possibly harm you. Go ahead and accept it, as it may bring you good luck."

I wore Badge Number 13 all during my years of service. Maybe, wearing it after a man who had just killed an outlaw brought me good luck, or I wouldn't be here to tell you about the Rangers.

The Arizona Rangers had no uniforms, no dress parade, no flags, no saluting. We just had that five-pointed silver star badge which we wore most of the time under the vest or the jacket. When we went to arrest a bad man, we placed the star in plain sight. It did more to make an outlaw hoist his hands high than a shining forty-five. The hard hombre soon learned the hard way that he'd better listen when an Arizona Ranger spoke.

Rangers Punish Raiders

I was ordered to patrol the border with five or six other men, that first year. The Sombreros Grandes were making regular raids into Arizona, gathering up cattle, and then making wild stampedes to shove them across the border. It was up to the Rangers to head the outlaws off before they hit the

international line. A few times, not all the rustlers got back to Mexico. And, finally, they began to understand we meant business.

I remember once when ten Sombreros Grandes came across, rounded up three hundred head of cattle, and dashed for the border. There were five of us, and we made up our minds to beat them to it.

A week later, the five of us were called into headquarters by Captain Rynning. "What the devil!" he snorted. "I thought I had a string of cowboys under me. But it looks like I got a bunch of farmers."

He read a bill he'd received from the Copper Queen general store in Bisbee. It read:

To Arizona Rangers, Dr.	
Two picks	$6.00
Two shovels	$5.00
Total	$11.00

After a long silence, Ranger Sergeant Harry Wheeler spoke up.

"Well, Cap, three got away, leaving seven to be buried. The ground was hard and rocky. It just needed those tools to do the job."

Captain Rynning looked mighty proud then. "All right, boys," he laughed, "I'll pay the bill. I guess it was worth it."

Often, we had to play the cattle rustler's own game and beat him at it. Naturally the rustler hiding out in his camp in the mountains would be suspicious of any well-dressed "dudey" cowboys who might try to throw in with him. And now that we were doing inside detective duty, we knew it.

Instead a couple of Rangers would ride into the rustler's camp, wearing slouch hats, run over boots, well-worn checkered shirts, and our stars pinned on the inside of our jackets.

Most of us could speak the lingo of the outlaw when we had to. So that we were soon admitted into the circle, drank coffee out of the same pot and were, in general, not suspected of our mission.

I camped all one winter on the Verde River with two notorious cattle rustlers. Next spring, we cashed in with forty head of yearling heifers and steers, all branded as mavericks after being bedded down in a secluded spot.

When our chuck ran low, I'd take a pack mule and pretend to go to the store. But, instead, I'd ride down the river to the LaTourett Ranch and its owners, who wanted the rustlers caught, would give me all the grub I needed.

When the time was ripe, I made the last trip. I pretended that I was going for chuck and for a crooked cattle buyer who'd swap us cash for the yearlings.

I stopped at the first post office and mailed a letter to Captain Rynning, asking him to send me another Ranger post-haste to the LaTourett ranch. Frank Wheeler of Gila Bend was the nearest rancher in that locality. Three days later, he rode up to the ranch.

We started after the rustlers. Two cowboys rode with us to take care of the cattle. But Frank Wheeler and I took care of the rustlers.

Two Scared Hombres

I've never seen two more scared hombres. My winter pals were really surprised and shaking when they looked down two .45 barrels and saw our big five-pointed stars blazing in full sight on the outsides of our jackets.

The yearlings were turned over to a cattle inspector. Those that could be identified were delivered to their respective owners. The others were sold at public auction to the highest bidder and the proceeds turned over to the Territory. The two rustlers were given a couple of years each enjoying the sunshine in the Yuma territorial pen.

Another time, three of us Rangers rode into a good-sized cow spread with about twelve punchers. We were heavily armed as usual and were looking for a couple of horse thieves. The range boss invited us to get down and have a bite.

We kept a sharp lookout for thieves masking as honest cowhands. These men were all on the payroll and top hands, according to the boss. After supper, we noticed three of the men whispering to each other, twisting around and looking very uneasy. They maneuvered to keep us always in front of them, and seemed very anxious to catch every word we were saying.

Finally, Ranger Jeff Kidder struck the boss for jobs for us three. Then the boss caught on to who we were.

"Well," he countered. "We might be able to use you for a few days till the steer roundup is over."

Next morning, three of that outfit's top hands were missing, along with their horses and saddles. When the Rangers were making their wholesale cleanups, many rustlers alias cowhands, left the Territory between suns. The record will show that some four hundred cattle rustlers were convicted between suns during the right years of the Rangers, and hundreds more run out.

Dicing With Death

Every Ranger knew he was taking his life in his own hands when he took out after an owlhoot. There were no insurance policies issued on Rangers, no compensation in case of injury or death. A few thousand dollars was voted for the widow of Carlos Tafoya by the territorial legislature. If a wounded Ranger lived long enough to be treated, the nearest army post would take care of him. We were subject to the U. S. military commanders in the Territory.

When Ranger Bill Maxwell was killed on Black River by the Smith brothers, the crown of his hat was shot out. It lay right where Maxwell had fallen for several years. The cowboys were a shade superstitious about removing the property or remains of a dead man.

I was acquainted with both factions in the bloody Graham-Tewksbury feud, better known as the Pleasant Valley War. I've had a shooting acquaintance with some of Arizona's hardest men. One day, I met Blackjack Tom Ketchum and four of his gang. Next day, they killed two young men who were trailing them—Frank Le Seur and Gus Gibbons. The killing took place fifteen miles north of St. John's, Arizona.

I was stationed at Springerville, Arizona, when I received the following telegram:

ZUNI INDIAN AGENCY, BLACK ROCK, NEW MEXICO.
RUSTLERS HAVE SWOOPED DOWN ON OUR RESERVATION AND DRIVEN OFF MULES AND SADDLE HORSES BELONGING TO THE GOVERNMENT AND INDIANS AND ARE HEADED TOWARD THE BORDER. CAN YOU TAKE THEIR TRAIL AND TRY AND CAPTURE THEM?

A. Z. HUTTO,
U. S. STOCKMAN, DEPUTY U. S. MARSHAL.

I thought the matter over. First, I figured, it's a call from the U. S. Indian office and I'm under federal authority as an Arizona Ranger. But, second, the call came from another territory where I was not legally required to go.

Then I looked at a P. S. on the telegram:

A LIBERAL REWARD WILL BE PAID YOU FOR THE CAPTURE OF THE RUSTLERS AND RETURN OF THE ANIMALS.

I needed money. My answer was: "I will go."

I called upon an old cowpuncher who was an ex-trapper, a crack trailer, and a good all-round man to have around. He agreed to go with me for a share of the reward.

We rode east into what is now Catron County, New Mexico. Then that section was part of Socorro County. We overtook two Zuni Indian trailers who were also scouting in search of the rustlers.

They were out of chuck and were ready to go back to their tepees with their tired horses.

We filled them up, and the world looked brighter to them on a full meal. Then we asked them to take the trail with us. And the world didn't have those two braves beat as trailers.

Trail Rustlers for Miles

We trailed the rustlers a hundred and sixty-five miles until we were near their camp in the mountains. We overtook a confederate of theirs and held him as hostage for four days. Then we surrounded th camp and captured the three rustlers, recovering sixty head of mules and horses.

The three prisoners were turned over to Lieutenant John Collier and a member of the New Mexico Mounted Police at St. John's.

Manuel Maris, the brains of the gang, served his time in the New Mexico territorial pen at Santa Fe. Then he went back to his shack in the Zuni Mountains of that territory, shot his wife, and afterwards turned the gur on himself.

I got a lot of publicity for capturing the Maris gang. But I've never received one dollar of the promised reward. I'm an old man of seventy-five, and no longer able to make my living in the saddle. I'm not griping. But I hope soon that Uncle Sam will write me out a check to close that account which is now forty years overdue.

COW-COUNTRY QUIZ

① WHAT BECAME OF BOB FORD, THE KILLER OF JESSE JAMES?

② WHAT WAS BUFFALO BILL'S RECORD IN KILLING BUFFALO?

③ WHO DISCOVERED YELLOWSTONE PARK?

④ WHAT UNUSUAL GREETING DID THE NEZ PERCE INDIANS GIVE EXPLORER MARCUS WHITMAN'S WIFE?

⑤ WHO WAS THE "NAPOLEON OF THE PLAINS"?

The answers are on Page 153—if you MUST look!

THE COWARD

He came up like a cannon ball, smashing his head into Coleman's chest

Branded "yellow" before the girl he loves, Will Coleman works out his salvation like a true son of the West!

by T. C. McCLARY

WITH day's first flush of rose-and-yellow sky, "Lefty" Loren rode up through the curdled, chalk-gray mists that filled the valley of the Canadian and crossed the still-blue-shadowed prairie and came upon Will Coleman feeding his quarterbreds at the pasture gate.

Lefty sat there watching, a gray-haired, string-muscled old gila monster who had tamed towns with the Marlows, Will Tilghman, Luke Short, "Bat" Masterson, the best of them, and was still a man who could get his gun out early.

He noted the assurance, the fondness even, the stallion had for Coleman, and it crossed his mind that bred into the mustang, as Coleman meant to, this kind of horse would change the history of the cow country. Coleman was the kind of man who built for the future,

who did something today with his eye on twenty years ahead.

"When you first come out," the old triggerman allowed, "I figured you plumb loco to go bag-feeding brood stock. But I will eat humble pie since seeing them quarterbreds race a mustang cavvy through the Baldrock Hills."

For the barest instant, Coleman froze. Without turning, he asked on a tight note, "King wasn't running from a mustang stallion?"

"Tarnation!" Lefty snorted. "He done made himself king of his own range the first time a mustang tried to steal his mares off him!"

Coleman expelled a long breath and turned with a bitter pride upon his long, thoughtful face.

"I'm glad one dude had the nerve to show the local roughstock up," he said.

Lefty Loren shot him a shrewd glance of sun-bleached eyes and reached for a chew. "You was fighting for your women, you'd manage, too," he grunted.

"I might try. There is a difference," Coleman stated harshly. "After Blackjack's hazing the other day, I am not even sure of that."

"Heck, man," Lefty exploded, "what have I spent three months teaching you to shoot for? Why didn't you throw down on that bunch of toughs and blaze them into glory?"

COLEMAN made a gesture and swallowed, and looked away. He said with blunt admission, "I was afraid to draw, Lefty. That is the plain truth of it. I guess you'd say I was yellow."

"You've gone proddy!" Loren snorted. "It took nerve aplenty when you jumped into the flood head and fished me out, with half-ton boulders popping around like pebbles!"

Coleman shrugged wearily and stared at the ground between his boots. He said hoarsely, "I couldn't draw on a man if he was killing me, Lefty, and this is gun country. I reckon that don't leave me much but to get out of it."

"By golly, I ought to drop twenty, thirty years off me and beat your head!" Loren barked. "You drift in and build a neat little spread and get a cavvy of real hossflesh well started and the liking of all the better element, and then you get tangled up by a no-'count bunch of toughs and aim to let 'em drive you out!"

His mustaches were quivering and he gazed angrily across the prairie at Clementine Marcy's house.

"How about—"

Coleman's head snapped up. "No word has ever been spoken," he broke in sharply. "And if I am not man enough to hold my head up, at least I am not coyote enough to put my shame upon a woman."

When he spoke again it was with that harshest sound on earth, a man's bitter contempt and loathing for himself.

"No, there is nothing left but to get out. It is fight or run, and I can take a licking but I cannot draw a gun."

Loren contained himself with effort. "The time will come when you will draw and shoot and see your own nerve win out," he grated. "You have the nerve and I have given you the gun hand."

He shot Coleman a fiery look of temper. "See you in town, if you come in," he rasped, and left a plume of dust boiling in the golden light as evidence of his anger.

Coleman stood there with his lips compressed, searching through memory for some earlier time when he had shown the yellow feather. He found none. Short of drawing his gun, he had not had much chance to fight, of course. "Blackjack's" toughs had roped him around the middle and made play of him after that.

But he could still have called an insult that would have made it a personal matter with one man. He had failed to do either, numbed by the knowledge that these were not simple toughs, but rock-hard outlaws, making a last stand in this forgotten wedge of territory adjoining Oklahoma.

Of this wild bunch, Blackjack Mack was lord and master. He was brutal, violent, vicious. It was Blackjack who had put the boys up to the hazing, and from here on they would vie with each other to curry his favor. The outlaw had disliked Coleman on first sight, but the fact that the dude had outspokenly championed the joining of this lawless territory to Oklahoma had carried his dislike into flaming hatred.

Coleman finished his morning's chores, found himself seeking some excuse not to go to town, and, cursing silently at himself, went in to dress. He had a date for tonight with Clementine Marcy for the Bullcalf shivaree, and he

rode the four miles to her house framing the best way to get out of it.

He turned in, darkening and feeling the drift of an unbearably lonely ache go through him as she smiled at him. She was a woman with a stalwart roundness and the dark beauty of quiet forest pools in her eyes. She made a face at him.

"You've not been so busy over yonder you could not drop over," she told him. "I've been watching."

He gave a slow, heavy smile. He said, "Clem, you shouldn't live way out here all alone like this."

She made a gesture of accepting life the way it came. "It is all the home I have, Will. And you are right across the way."

THE HEAVINESS filled him. He was a man who loved a woman and wanted to protect her, but recognizing his own shortcoming against a lawless, brutal land, he held back the things he'd say.

But she sensed him out. She put a firm hand impulsively on his arm. "Will, stop eating your heart out this way!" she cried. "The toughs don't matter. You're a gentleman!"

He gave her the appreciation of a somber smile, but shook his head. "No, Clementine. As a man, I have failed miserably."

She lifted her face directly to him. She opened the gates of her womanliness and let him see clear down into her heart.

"You have never failed me, Will," she told him. "You never would."

"Sometime," he murmured huskily, "I hope I can show what your faith meant."

She smiled with a Frontier woman's deep knowledge of the good and bad in men. She turned the bitterness of his mood.

"You can come grub me out a fresh garden space to prove it," she laughed at him.

He did not know how she managed the rest. But he rode townward with the promise to pick her up at "Sissy" Jones' and drive her to the shivaree.

He dropped down on the town with the nerves springing in his neck and tightening into knots inside his stomach. It was Saturday and the whole country was drifting in.

He saw Mel Tallus a full half block away and caught the rise of scorn and wicked anticipation on Tallus' reckless, vicious face. Tallus was one of Blackjack's wilder, more brutal dogs, a man who preferred torture to killing for the sheer love of it.

Coleman stopped in front of Sweetzer's and paused on the walk to roll a cigarette before going in for purchases. When he came out, Tallus had moved his position to a post in front of the Canadian Bar.

Tallus leaned there with his hat poked forward on his nose, the hot sunlight slashing under its shadow and lying upon the cruelty of his mouth.

Coleman put his purchases into his saddle-bags and stood a moment feeling nerves strain all through him like a thousand pulling wires. If Tallus was there so was Blackjack, and a smart man in Coleman's boots would mount his horse and ride out while he was able.

But it was not in Coleman to run out, and using a cinch slip as a cover to relax the twisted tightness of his muscles, he moved straight for the Canadian, looking flat at Tallus, and went on inside.

The place was crowded, not by robust cattle outfits, but by slash-faced customers, eyes hard with murder and mouths molded by wanton brutality.

Blackjack Mack leaned midway of the bar, a brute of a man in whom every unholy passion formed a towering pyramid for flaunting pride and vanity. He saw Coleman enter and heeled slowly on one elbow, raw, mean eyes coming bright with deviltry.

Coleman slowed. He felt the clutch of cold fear in his stomach. But even deeper was a dude's perplexity of what to do. Lefty Loren's nasal drawl solved the question.

"Dude, step in here and palaver about that running chestnut I been wanting."

Coleman swung in to the bar beside the angular and gaunting old gun king, whose bleak gray eyes were twinkling now as he caught the shine of sweat on Coleman's brow. He signaled a drink and grunted in a low voice.

"Dude, you just ain't got no sense a-tall!"

Coleman forced a tight grin. "What can a man do?"

"With some kinds, walk in the back

door and walk in shooting," Loren advised.

"What about the gun code?" Coleman asked.

LEFTY LOREN filled with ironic humor. "I will tell you something, bucko, on account of I'm getting old enough now not to care. There has never been a fair gunfight. One man always has the drop, one man always has the better balance. And if you can trick the other hombre, you do it, and figure to make the story right after."

He beetled bushy brows up the bar. "But in my time there was real men in the game, leastwise. This 'ole is nothing but a nest of sidewinders!"

He spat, and they went to talking horseflesh and then fell into the friendly silence of their kind. Up the bar, Blackjack was boasting arrogantly. "Why, we've got half a continent to milk and nobody to skim the cream from us here. Who in Hades thinks I'll let 'em bring in law?"

"Well, the righteous and holy held that meeting to join the territory into Oklahoma," Jesse Grace allowed. "And that sure means law."

Blackjack turned at right angles to the bar, eyes roving for trouble.

"Why, I could round up that bunch and toast 'em on a running iron single-handed!" he boomed. "But who had the nerve to try and breast me thataway?"

Lefty noted Coleman's pallor from the tail of his eye. "Don't look good for someone," he allowed.

Coleman gave a feeble grin. "Me," he nodded.

Lefty leaned forward on the bar and put his two cents in.

"You'll get law," he told Blackjack. "Same as it come to Austin, Hays, Abilene, Ogallala, Dodge, Cheyenne—and for the same reason."

Blackjack scowled. "Because hombres like you weren't tough enough to run the marshals out?" he demanded.

Lefty shot him a bleak look. "Because men get tired of dancehall girls and sleeping with their boots on," he corrected, "and want a town where their own women can come without having to wear blinds for shame."

Blackjack's lips twisted in a contemptuous grin. "Yore getting old, Lefty! Your palavering with the angels already! Or mebbe that hand of yours is getting slow and your worried about the sons who've been waiting to put you in Boothill."

Lefty stretched and stood back from the bar with indifference.

"Trouble with you young hombres," he drawled, "you ain't learned your manners."

His left hand blurred. Orange-black flame bit in front of Coleman. Two men were standing close by Blackjack, and the bullet fanned both of them as the glass in front of Blackjack Mack exploded.

Lefty blew the smoke from his gun with an old hand's contempt. "Don't you young boys ever get the idea my hand has gotten slow," he cautioned.

He gave the startled bunch a cool, flat look, jerked his head at Coleman, and moved out through the batwings careless of Blackjack's fiery gaze. Outside, he stopped and stared square at Tallus.

"Your boss," he grunted, "needs you inside to mop up for him."

"What's that?" Tallus barked, then caught the bleak light of the old eagle's eyes and, cursing, swung on in.

"Always pick the master to break a stampede," Lefty commented, as he swung into leather and rode Coleman to the fork.

He reined up there, scowling at a red dust-devil chasing behind a line of singed brown hills.

"It ain't good for my conscience to go saving a dude's wuthless hide," he growled. "You get fixed to shoot it out with Blackjack, so you can walk in pride agin."

Coleman let out an unhappy sigh. "It's no use, Lefty. Say I haven't any courage, if you will."

"That ain't so, or you wouldn't have waltzed in there!" Lefty rasped. "It is what makes me so goldarned mad with you!"

"Even if I got the drop I couldn't shoot a man," Coleman mumbled.

Lefty opened his mouth to curse, caught the tight, corrosive expression of Coleman's eyes, and slammed his jaws shut.

"Well," he said after a space, "I reckon a man has to figure these things for himself. But it ain't right an hombre should have the courage to walk in on his own killing and no stomach to protect himself."

COLEMAN sat watching the old man ride off into the burning, chrome-white glare, then swung crosscountry up into the hills. He had found Clementine Marcy, and peace and contentment, in this country, and he had been taken with a man's surging desire to root and build.

Then he had found that *outlaw* and *desperado* were not just impersonal terms, but a dangerous shadow that was very close and personal to every decent man and woman on the range. He had done what he could in what he thought the right and lawful way. He had joined Tool Rainey's movement to bring the territory into the State.

Tool Rainey had been burned alive in a haystack for that, and his widow rustled of every bit of stock they had. Except for Coleman, the whole movement would have fallen apart. It had been Coleman who kept the respectable element together, who kept talking up the thing. But he was too temperate, too law-abiding, to become an outlaw-country leader.

He sat his horse on a rock shelf and rolled a cigarette and looked bluntly upon his failure. He had taken a position he could not fill, and now he had to let his friends down further. It was bad enough to have his own pride dragged in the dust. It was impossible to stay on longer taking the protection of Lefty Loren.

He snubbed his smoke and wheeled his horse, and with a grim expression rode back to his shack. He would see his friends first, he would make a clean breast of things. He would stand in the pitiless fire of telling the girl that he was yellow.

Near sundown he drove his buckboard and matched gray team to Sissy Jones', almost breaking with the crush of feelings as he moved through the shadowed, crimson light that filled the yard.

Clementine came to the door, pleasure striking a deep glow into the dark beauty of her face. She stood there, swirling her wide skirts slowly, showing herself with frank and honest hopes for the approval of her man.

He stopped dead-still and felt the choke in his throat as he took her in. There was nothing, he thought, that a man might ever hope or want that this woman could not give him. It made what he meant to do the harsher. It made his shame a writhing, clawing thing within.

"Lovelier than a man could dream," he murmured huskily. "A picture a man would see as he died, Clementine!"

"Why Mr. Coleman!" she flushed with pleasure. "If I am half of that, why not see the picture living?"

He forced a smile through his black and bitter mood. He spoke with grave courtesy to Sissy. He handed Clementine into the buckboard and spanked his team into a rhythmic trot, stirring to her honest admiration. "Will, in all the years I've lived here," she said, "no wrangler has ever hit the country who could gentle and train a horse as well as you!"

They climbed out of the long, slanting shadows filling the valley onto a mesa washed with a tide of blood-red light deepening slowly to maroon. The sky blazed with pagan glory as the world sank into cool velvet dusk.

He wanted to tell her first of any, but he could not bring himself to spoil the gaiety of her mood, and they came to Ramsey's great haybarn and were swept up by the high-spirited shivaree before he knew it. He would, he decided, wait until supper and then draw his friends aside and tell all of them at once.

In the meantime, he grasped with a man's desperation at a few last fleeting hours of happiness.

MIDWAY of evening, the shivaree's high spirits were cut short by the arrival of Blackjack Mack and his wild crew. Caution dropped over the men like a blanket, and at intervals fear ripped through them with a raw smell. Some with most reasoning moved closer to the check rack for their guns. Eyes grew watchful and grins flinty, and voices overloud and taut.

Through this, Blackjack's outfit moved with arrogant contempt, deviltry on their faces and wild humor in them.

Mel Tallus leaned against a post, questing for trouble, eyes bright with liquor. He watched Clementine wheel and figure down the floor, a raw desire rising to his vicious face, turning it reckless and dangerous and cruel.

At the end of the set he sauntered over to claim a dance, and Coleman saw

her face sharpen with apprehension and suddenly knew this was not the first time she had been bothered. He moved in and said without truculence, but firmly.

"Out of luck, Tallus. She has already favored me."

Coleman started to take her hand and Tallus ripped out a curse beneath his breath. A vicious twist jerked across his upper lip and his eyes looked like hot lead. He pivoted his rough, angular frame on one heel so that his elbow, held flat across his chest, smashed Coleman in the wishbone, knocking out his breath.

It was a trick that not many saw. But they saw Coleman's white face and heard Tallus sneer, "I didn't ask you, Dude, but if you want to make something of it, try it!"

The girl bit her lip. She knew Tallus and the brutal damage he could do with bare hands and fists, and if those failed, his vengeful malice that knew no code nor limit.

Coleman was laboring to catch his breath, but in his eyes was the grim light of a man who knows he will get a mauling but means to take it.

The girl laid her hand quickly on his arm. With forced assurance, she said, "It is all right, Will. I know Tallus."

Tallus grinned and arched his chest and preened in brutal glory. But it was not in him to understand. He took it the other way—that she had been taken with his manhood and preferred him. He swung her through the set, possessive in the swings, and at the end he took her arm in an iron grip and half lifted her out the back door before she knew it.

He swung her back into the shadows, pressed her back against the wall. His eyes were red and wicked and animal hungry as he looked down at her. He saw the rapid fluttering of her breathing and her wide gaze and mistook the sign.

"You picked the right hombre when you picked me, baby!" he gloated.

His breath was hot upon her face when he was grabbed and flung around. He spun with the instant balance of a fighter. He saw Coleman before him and brute anger exploded from him in a roar.

He feinted and rolled Coleman's blow off one shoulder and came up like a cannon ball, smashing his head into Coleman's chest.

Coleman staggered back into a buggy, where the wheel rim almost paralyzed his back.

Tallus grabbed his hair and jerked him forward and slammed him face down in the dust. He was fixing to jump his high heels into Coleman's kidneys when Lefty Loren's voice came like a blizzard wind:

"Cut it, Tallus!"

Tallus froze in that grotesque position, turning his head slowly until he saw the six-gun and the bleak violence in the eyes above it. Blackjack came out the door, and Lefty swung a quarter circle and grunted.

"Get tha mad dog of yours out of here pronto, Blackjack!" he ordered.

Blackjack flamed, his eyes turned to pools of fire. "What's wrong with that yellow dog of yours?" he rasped. "Can't he stand up for himself? If the girl picked Tallus, that is up to her."

BUT CLEMENTINE was making her choice clear. She had darted across the space and dropped in the round pool of her skirts, and oblivious of the gathering crowd had taken Coleman's head against her breast.

"Reckon that is plain enough even for *your* wolf pack, Blackjack!" Lefty said dryly. He made a gesture of his gun at Tallus. "Get moving, fellow!"

Tallus saw the movement and caught the deadliness of the voice, but he was glaring at Clementine with solid hatred in his eyes.

"Picking a yellow pup like him against a man like me!" he rasped. "By heaven, there is nothing would be bad enough for the pair of you!"

Lefty's voice sharpened. "You collaring that coyote, Blackjack, or do I shoot him down for what he is?"

Blackjack cursed, but he was no fool, and he knew if Lefty's first shot took Tallus, his second would take him faster than he could draw. "Get the devil out of here!" he barked at Tallus, and gave him a shove. He paused a moment to glare at the crowd. "But I got something to say for myself. There has been too many meetings about petitioning this territory into the State. And just to make it clear what's going to happen, I am giving this yella-livered tinhorn to sunup to clear out!"

He stopped and gave Coleman a sneering look. "And if he ain't, there is going to be hell-raising on this range by night, and the respectable element ain't going to have to worry about toting him to Boothill!"

Swinging his massive head on Lefty, he grated, "As for you, you snag-toothed old lobo, you'd best get over the idea fast you're still town-taming!"

He raked them with his fiery gaze, gave a blast of angry contempt, and moved off after Tallus.

Coleman struggled to his feet. He stood with a dipper of water somebody fetched him, head bowed, breathing hard. Friends tried awkwardly to say a word of cheer, but his fall in their estimation was reflected in their voices.

This had not been a gang hazing, but a two-man fight and over Coleman's girl, and only Lefty's gun had saved him from a brutal licking. There was no middle ground for a man in outlaw country. It was whip or get whipped. Kill or get killed. Rule the roost or crawl.

Lefty gestured with his head and the crowd broke up and began to drift. Lefty stood silent, scowling, chewing on one handlebar mustache. "Blackjack meant that," he said finally with metallic restraint.

"I know," Coleman nodded.

For a space the old eagle looked as if he would explode, then biting down the anger in him, he grunted, "Need some help packing up?"

"No, thanks," Coleman muttered dully. He lifted his head suddenly, said thickly, "Lefty, that chestnut runner in the barn will be for you."

Lefty Loren swore and his eyes took on a hard shine. He nodded abruptly, said, "Watch out for Tallus in the meantime," and pivoted on one high heel and moved back into the barn.

WILL COLEMAN helped the girl into the buckboard. He reached under the seat, buckled on his gun. Not a sound came from her as they drove, but inside she was crying. They came to her house and he lifted her down, and stood soaking in the torn beauty of her face.

"Will," she murmured, "there are places where men are not all tough and wild and brutal, and where a man does not have to turn half savage to hold his head up."

She was offering to go with him and he knew it, and gave a grim, melancholy shake of his head.

"I came from a place like that, Clementine," he said slowly, "and I will never go back."

He smiled down at her, leaned and kissed her on the forehead. Then he took her elbow and turned her toward her house.

"I hope," he said at the door, "you find what you deserve in life."

"And you?" she asked shakenly.

He gave a short, ironic laugh, said, "I think I am finding it." Gazing at her again, he soaked in every detail of the way she looked beneath the starlight, and then he squeezed her hand and touched his hat. Shortly he was trotting his team down toward the ford.

From the opposite side he looked back at the house, saw the solitary glow of yellow light coming from one room. Then he saw the shadow dart across that yellow square. Maybe nothing but a shift of light, but it could have been a rider, too.

He made the reins fast to the whipstock and clucking the team into a steady trot, dropped off the rear end of the buckboard. He waded the ford and climbed the hill as her light went out and the house stood black and gaunt and silent against the light of a rising moon.

Coleman heard her own pony snort out in the corral, and he circled through shadow and flattened back against the wall. Time moved with an eternity of silence and the stars began to dim. Then he caught the sound, or maybe it was but a sensing, of a body scraping along the other wall.

He heard the lift of a window and sudden white-hot anger surged up through his worry and indecision. He spread his gun hand, stretching the fingers to the full in the manner Lefty had taught him to relax his muscles. He sucked a deep lungful of air and steadied his heart, and was vaguely conscious of a new-found pride that held himself from lurching into a full-tilt run.

Moving silently with balance, and his left hand against the wall, he rounded the corner with his shoulder hugging it and watched the solid block of a man's shadow propping an open window up. He caught the sour smell of redeye, and then the figure stood back to place an empty keg the man had brought. "Not

this time, Tallus!" Coleman said then, with merciless quiet.

Tallus spun around and threw himself at the deepest shadow, clutching for his gun.

Coleman stood with his six-shooter out, head cocked a little, keened intently to the sounds. He remembered Lefty Loren saying, "Never shoot until you know for certain," and he held his gun steady, but loosely, waiting to make sure.

Coleman could catch the rasp of the man's hard breathing. He caught the conflict in him of reckless contempt and cold fear.

"So you're really yellow at the bottom, Tallus?" he asked into the dark, and heard the jerk of the man's breath just before his six-gun spit orange-red fire.

Coleman's gun swung a half inch. Cold violence seemed to move him. In lightning time he figured how Tallus would be crouching, and he put three fanned shots in a pattern around the spot that blaze had come from.

He heard a click and a half choke, and the weight of a body pitching out onto the dirt. He moved cautiously to another point and stopped dead-still, but no sound came from the blur of shadow. Until the door of the house flung open, he could only hear his heart.

STANDING erect, Coleman moved through shadow and prodded the body in the dark. He said on a flat, unpitying note, "It is all right, Clementine. Don't come out."

He caught her expelled breath of relief and gratitude for hearing him. She breathed with sudden weakness in her voice.

"Oh, my darling!" she cried. "Come in, come in!"

"No," he answered, "I am riding. But you are all right now."

He swung to the corral and heard the jingle of a bridle chain and smelled down Tallus' horse ground-hitched in the carriage shed. He led it out and hit leather and put it into a pounding gallop.

The stars were gone but moonlight lay a sea of silver-white down the blackness of the hills, and the melancholy of death and parting lay in the fleeting night. He felt no victory, he felt no fear. He felt like a man afoot in a desert, doomed and knowing it, but driven by the solitary urge of struggling on. The Canadian Bar was a riot of noise and blaze of light when he reached it. He stood at the hitch-rack unkinking knotted nerves and thinking of Lefty's advice. The alley lay black with shadow, but he could feel his way to the back door, and he stood thinking of that long space before moving up the front steps of the saloon.

Coleman passed through the batwings and stopped to accustom his eyes to the smoky, yellow light, and he heard a raw laugh rip and then trail off into curious silence as he moved forward to the bar.

The silence spread and he watched Blackjack turn his big brutish body and note him with wild contempt, and then he saw contempt sink into perplexity and caution.

"Dude," Blackjack grated dangerously, "you must be drunk. It is mighty near to dawn."

"The time you're going to ride out," Coleman answered leadenly. "Or join your man Tallus in Kingdom Come!"

Blackjack's eyes sprang wide before they hooded and turned wicked. His nostrils flared and he snorted like a bull.

"You are saying that to me?" the outlaw asked disbelievingly but with mounting anger. "Why Dude, I ain't even going to shoot you. I'm going to take and toast you like an ear of corn!"

He lifted a sudden bark of roaring laughter that broke with violent fury in mid-note. His big head tossed, his eyes turned pure red.

"Bust him!" he ordered curtly over Coleman's head.

"No," Lefty Loren's flinty voice said from the doorway, "you boys just stay where you are. It is Blackjack and Coleman ordering each other out, and we will see which one is man enough to stand in pride and glory."

They were a merciless bunch, a codeless crew, but there was Lefty's gun down on them, and he knew their language. Coleman had lifted himself out of the ragged herd when he came looking for trouble through the front door, and now it was a personal fight between the rancher and the outlaw.

Blackjack's eyes darted around that sea of hard, expectant faces, and nowhere except in two men Lefty had covered did he find a shred of the pack

spirit. He had made a lawless threat and a man's decent challenge had been thrown back. And black and conscienceless and murderous as these men were, they had respect for that.

His face paled a shade and his lips turned wet, and trickiness shimmered beneath the angered surfaces of his eyes. He gave a snort of contempt and swung to the bar.

"It was dawn I said and dawn I meant!" he rasped and poured a drink.

Coleman's hand blurred and his gun barked and the glass exploded under Blackjack's hand.

"It will take till dawn for you to get into your saddle," he said metallically. His gun was beaded on the outlaw's head. "You had your chance, Blackjack. More chance than you gave Rainey or any others. Get moving now! Pronto."

BLACKJACK turned white with anger, but a gun in the hand of a man who could drag and shoot like that was something to respect.

He stood gripping the bar, fighting with his pride, then grated harshly, "You've got the drop. But this ain't a big country, Coleman, and there will come another dawn!"

He stood glaring for a moment, then moved with an angered, lumbering motion for the doors.

"I'll be back one day!" he roared, and flung by a post. Catching it with his left hand, he whipped around it, shooting.

Coleman felt the smash of lead in his left arm and the sting of the second shot on his neck, but he did not jump. He stood rooted, with his gun questing for a target.

Blackjack's face went wild with frenzy, and his third shot drilled the bar. Then Coleman's lips peeled back in a grin of cold, ruthless determination. He shot twice, once to each side of the post, and the shots straightened and staggered the outlaw into the open.

The outlaw triggered again and the shot kicked sawdust right under Coleman's boot, but the man never moved, and his gunsights came up steadily. Blackjack was dead-gray, his brutal face going formless with fear. He saw straight into Coleman's barrel and his breath exploded in a rusty cry. He tried to trigger again and could not.

He stared down at it as if it was a strange thing he had never seen, and tried three times to pull the trigger.

Coleman's voice came like the knell of doom. "Shooting's too good for your kind, Blackjack," he called. "Get riding. And know that wherever you go, they'll jeer and hoot you for your yellow liver!"

Blackjack stared wildly from his gun to Coleman and back to his gun. With a sudden raw outburst of sound that told of the breaking of a man's pride and spirit, he threw down his weapon and turned and ran, the dead silence held until his hoofbeats drummed out into the dawn.

Coleman looked at the men frozen around the room, and their pent-up breaths expelled on a single blast of sound. Half those men had been a part of Blackjack's outfit, but he sensed no sign of vengeance in them. With their leader's whipping, they were suddenly shy of Coleman.

His arm began to throb and he booted his gun and moved heavily to a table. Lefty came to patch him up, cackling with wild humor. "Boy," he chuckled, "that was a risky trick and gave him time for a last shot, but it will cut more ice than ten men shot down! What made you do it?"

"That was my last shot," Coleman said. "I forgot to load up after Tallus."

Lefty stood off as if stung. "Goldang it!" he exploded. But then suddenly he grinned. "Well, by gum, it took nerve at that. Standing there with an empty gun and telling a king outlaw he's got a yellow liver!"

Coleman gave him a puzzled look. "How come you came in behind me?"

"Oh, I was kinda riding your trail," Lefty admitted. "Knowing Tallus, and figuring you ain't all fool, I wanted to see what a dude would do when a killer mustang went after his woman."

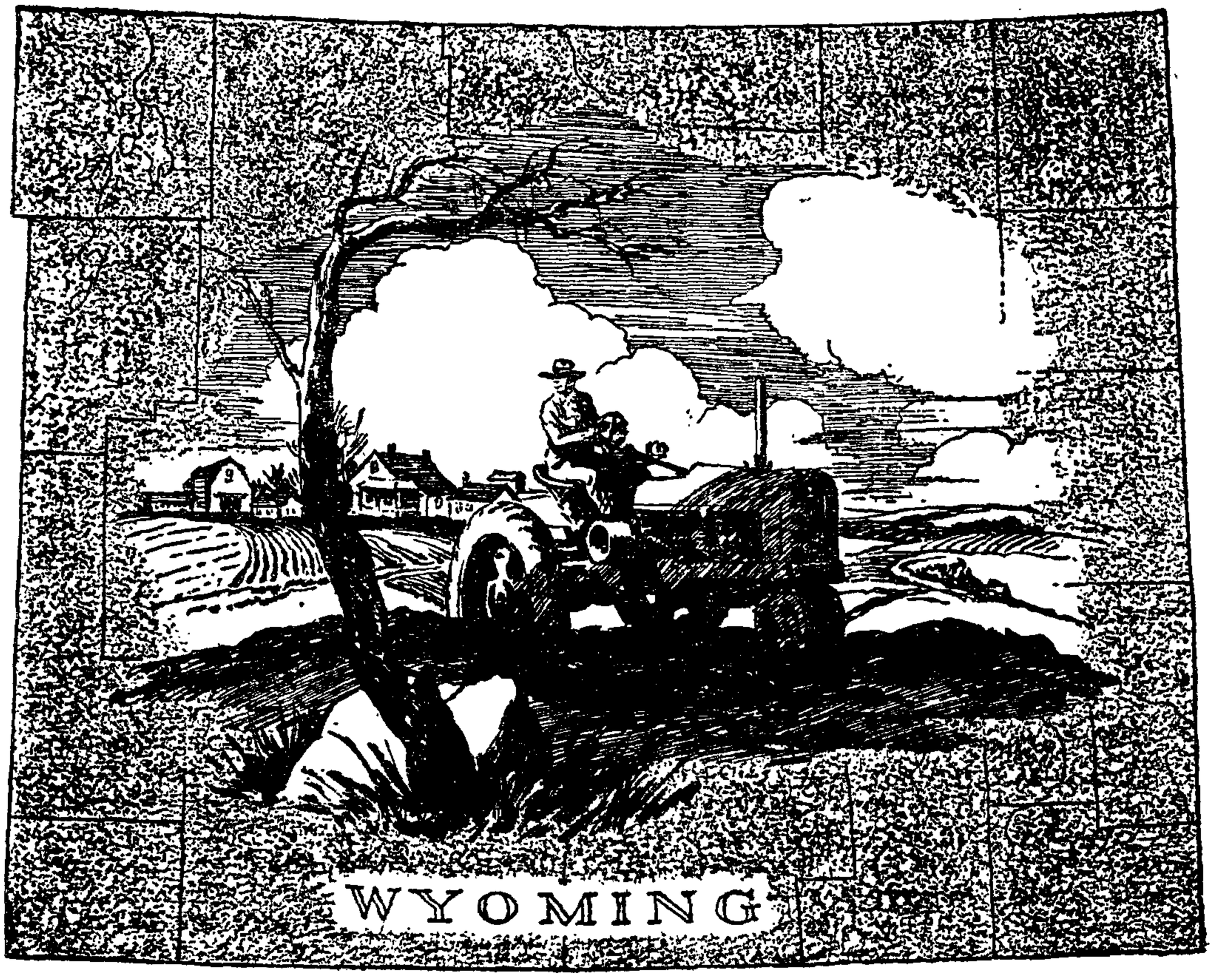
"You know now?" Coleman asked.

"No, I don't," Lefty told him. "You beer tricking me. Ya ain't no real dude, Coleman, or you'd have plugged him in the back while he was reaching for the window. And you wouldn't have come in here breasting Blackjack."

"I had to," Coleman muttered. "Tallus made it clear. I couldn't leave her living alone out there any longer. And I couldn't ask her to ride out with a coward."

"Son," Lefty said, "if all dudes are cowards like you, I'll take me the West and the bad hombres!"

WYOMING HOMESTEADS



Again settlers move Westward as Uncle Sam opens rich new government land to ambitious pioneers of today!

WANT a homestead in Wyoming? Who doesn't, huh? And these new farmsteads are virgin land in the public domain that fall within the irrigation limits of the Bureau of Reclamation's present irrigation projects in Wyoming.

There's no catch. Once in successful cultivation this now raw land can become a highly valuable piece of agricultural property. Block by block, as irrigation water becomes available, Uncle Sam is passing out these "modern" homesteads. They are part of what bids fair to be the greatest long range western land "rush" our country has ever seen. Wyoming's share in the vast farm

by JOHN A. THOMPSON

land irrigation projects that dot the new West.

The overall program embraces public lands within newly completed or partially completed Bureau of Reclamation irrigation projects throughout all the western States. But right now let's talk specifically about these new land opportunities in just one area—Wyoming.

Wyoming itself always was typically "western" outdoors country. It still is the land of the colorful cowboy. Its towering mountains, wide plains and rich valleys are natural livestock raising territory. Six-gallon hats, leather vests, high-heeled boots and the clink of spurs are part of almost every town and village in the State—and of the bigger cities too.

There is a fascination about the distant horizon to horizon vistas of Wyoming's plains, as there is to the ruggedness of its high-peaked mountains. There is a crispness in the air and a special brightness in the sunshine that draws western-minded settlers to this particular, and particularly glamorous State.

Moreover Wyoming is young. It's a grand place for red-blooded, pioneer-spirited Americans to grow up in. A grand section of the West to grow up *with*.

Two Projects Are Opened

Tucked away in this rich ranch country are sections of farm land, and two Bureau of Reclamation Irrigation Projects. One is the Heart Mountain Division of the Shoshone project where the irrigated raw land farms-to-be lie between Cody and Powell in the center of one of the finest scenic, fishing and hunting areas in the entire nation. The other lies around Riverton north of Lander in the central part of the State.

This year some 150 irrigated farm units comprising about 16,000 acres all told of public lands in both projects will be awarded farm settlers. Next year an approximately similar number of units and acreage will, it is expected, be readied for irrigation.

You don't have to buy this land. In fact you couldn't buy it—at any price. It is public domain, Government land falling within the irrigable limits of the Government Reclamation projects in question. The only way you can obtain one of these units is to homestead it under regulations applicable to homesteading these special types of irrigable farm units on Bureau of Reclamation projects throughout the West.

Veterans of World War II have first choice. The qualifying regulations are not onerous, and are designed primarily to insure the ultimate success of a settler on one of these undeveloped farm units rather than to hinder anyone from applying for one. You do, of course, have to be a U.S. citizen. That is one of the fundamental requirements of our homestead laws.

In addition applicants must have had at least 2 years farming experience, have $1,000 in cash or other useful assets, be in good health and of good character. Full details regarding the regulations that must be met are contained in a free leaflet "Settlement Opportunities on Reclamation Projects." To obtain a copy of this booklet all you have to do is write for one, and address your request to the Commissioner, Bureau of Reclamation, U.S. Dept. of Interior, Washington-25, D.C.

Homesteading has always been a strong American tradition, blossoming out particularly after every war in which the U.S. has been engaged. It is a tradition that is still going strong. The GI Joes of World War II had many a foxhole dream, envisioning a home and land of their own in the West where peace and security, and the fruits of their own efforts could be enjoyed in a free country for the rest of their days. This too was the earlier dream of the Doughboys of World War I, Grant's blue-clad veterans and the brave, ragged-clothed soldiers of Washington's first Continental Army.

Farm Units Laid Out

It is no more than natural that applications for irrigated farm land homesteads have been running away ahead of the number of farm units available. Because of this when individual blocks of land are ready and the individual farm units in it laid out, drawings are held at previously announced dates to determine who, among the qualified applicants will be the lucky winners of the farms.

It is a fair system. Those who lose out in one drawing, may win in the next. Eventually these irrigation farmsteads will embrace hundreds of thousands of acres of potentially rich but

now undeveloped agricultural land in the vast stretches of public domain still remaining in the West.

Drawings have already been held in both the Heart Mountain and Riverton irrigation districts in Wyoming and several hundred farm units awarded. Part of the land is now in cultivation, crops are growing and the boys who won the farms are going strong.

As a matter of fact history is repeating itself in Wyoming and just as the fighting front experiences of World War I saved lives and helped win battles in World War II so is the experience in irrigation farming, learned the hard way by veterans of the first war being used to help the soldiers of World War II get started.

It began back in 1921 when the first unit of the Goshen irrigation district, southwest of Torrington in the eastern section of the State was opened to World War I veterans. That year nearly 150 ex-Doughboys enthusiastically shucked their olive drab for farmers' overalls and started in to tackle peacetime living on the land Uncle Sam had given them —land that could be irrigated by waters from the North Platte River.

So proud were these ex-fighters for freedom and democracy that one of their first moves of community action was to petition the Union Pacific railroad—itself a pioneer in building up the West—to change the name of the near-by railhead that would service them to Veteran. Veteran, Wyoming was to be their very own—their village, their town and Union Pacific shipping point.

Railroad officials were willing. Veteran took its place on all Union Pacific railroad maps. It was there to stay. It's there today. Not a big city, just a small home town community Veteran, Wyoming, has schools, a post-office, a grain elevator, a lumber and feed yard and a general store to fill its citizens' needs.

Yet for all its modest size it is important as a symbol of free American enterprise, and in its own way significant because Veteran too was a battleground—a battleground where pioneers of World War I fought to establish themselves and their families on raw land capable of being turned into rich farm tracts by the master magic of irrigation.

Many of those earlier veterans, who won their farm units by drawings just as the veterans of World War II are doing today, had little conception of the rugged life that lay ahead of them. Particularly for the first few years of "getting settled" and getting their land into farm production. Not all of them stuck it out. Homesteading takes men geared to the job and the hardship of building up a new land. It always did. That holds as true for the modern pioneer as did for the boys of '21, and the even earlier settlers in the West.

Veterans Won Out

However, among those of the pioneer-spirited ex-Doughboys who are still around Veteran—the ones who stayed —virtually all are classed today by their friends and neighbors as all the way from "comfortably well off" to "wealthy and influential citizens." They have contributed both to the welfare of their part of Wyoming and to the state as a whole.

In fact one of these original settlers, Walter H. Hudson—no, he didn't become President, but he did become speaker of the Wyoming State House of Representatives a few years ago. Another, George F. ("Doc") Haas, recently had some potent words of advice, and recollection to give today's veterans who hope to draw, or nave already drawn public land irrigated farm homesteads in the new irrigation districts in Wyoming.

Haas, a veterinarian and now successful farmer, said some time ago in *The Reclamation Era:* "Nothing succeeds like success. The best thing a young fellow can do on irrigated land is to follow the pattern and system of successful farmers. When we (the veterans of World War I) started, too few of us knew much about irrigated farming. We had every kind of ex-soldier in the bunch from piano tuners to paperhangers.

"Too few of us remembered to forget that there are hours in the day and days in the week. We did not realize there was no let-up in work, season after season."

In other words if you think homesteading is going to be a soft snap, you'd better call the whole thing off. Forget the West and Wyoming right now. But if you're a sticker, the sort of guy that doesn't know when to quit,

and won't ever admit he's licked, go right ahead with your plans. You'll come out all right—in time. Just like Doc Haas and the others who stuck did after World War I.

Incidentally Doc has four fine grown sons now, and four daughters. He's turning the management of his farm holdings over to the "new" generation and thinking of retiring—in an active sort of way. But the chances are he'll never really quit. There is something about the land—especially your own land—that gets into the blood. And when its western land in Wyoming the pull is that much stronger. At least it seems to be.

The situation is a little different today than it was in Doc Haas' time. "Too few of us," he said, "knew anything about irrigated farming." Now the settler who wins one of the Bureau of Reclamation public land farm units at Heart Mountain, or Riverton gets more than just the raw acres and a hearty pat on the back from Uncle Sam. He immediately becomes eligible for what is known as on-the-farm training right out at the project itself. He goes back to school in his own district, from his own new home in the West.

Training Helps Settlers

The training program, like the qualifying regulations, was designed to overcome patent drawbacks to the old system that often only worked extra hardships on the new settlers, chopping down their original enthusiasm and in cases eventually resulting in sufficient discouragement to cause them to abandon their holdings. That was no good for the individual, the new community, or in the long run Uncle Sam himself.

So the on-the-farm school program was established to give qualified settlers a chance to receive regular training in accepted agricultural practices. Out at Heart Mountain, for instance, the farm-winning veterans are eligible for one year of training, plus an additional month for each month spent in the armed forces. The total, however, not to exceed four calendar years. And during this training period, subsistence payments to veterans enrolled in the agricultural courses are paid the "students" by the Veterans' Administration.

Though all the farm winning homesteaders have had some farm experience —farm experience is one of the qualifying regulations—these new westerners come from all parts of the country. Many have had no experience in irrigation farming. Others find that because of the difference in soil conditions, climate, crops grown and so forth what experience they have had has to be revised or learned over again to meet the demands of their new surroundings.

Since the school was to be primarily a course of practical instruction in irrigation farming, not just "book learnin'" the obvious place to look for "professors" was among the older farmers in the area—settlers who had learned by their own experience how to make a success of irrigation farming in that particular area. This was done, and the impromptu "profs" were glad to lend a neighborly hand.

As a result much of the instruction program these government land farm winners at Heart Mountain, Wyoming, received and are receiving is little like the stuffy curricula of more formal colleges. A great deal of it consists of informal, but thoroughly practical talks —bull sessions almost—by older farmers in the vicinity. The talks are followed by general discussions, and the farmer "profs" volunteer their services.

In addition specialists from the University of Wyoming are pressed into class-teaching service when they are in the area. Another part of the farm training is carried on by using extensively the various agricultural and farm educational films from agricultural college film libraries and other sources. The classroom movies are popular.

About one third of the 200 hours of classroom instruction required per year of each farm-winner student enrolled in the course is devoted to manual shop work. The new settlers are taught how to make such things as hog and brooder houses, fence gates, feeders and other essential bits of homemade equipment around a farm. What's more they make them themselves in the shop, then tote 'em out for use on their own farms.

Auto and truck repair work, and welding are also taught at the school. They are handy things for a pioneer farmer on his own to know about.

Still another phase of instruction is strictly on-the-farm teaching. This consists of field classes for the vets who tour, under the leadership of an instruc-

tor or demonstrator, successful farms in the neighborhood and observe at first hand such things as improved practices in crop growing, stock feeding, dairy procedure and so on. Then too a special emphasis is placed on planning the individual irrigation farm land homesteads so as to get the best returns from the soil and put the land itself to its best practical agricultural use.

Hard Work Spells Success

Pretty hard for a new homesteader, earnestly interested in his own progress and success, to miss in the long pull with all that extra help thrown into the undertaking, which nevertheless remains his own individual enterprise. By the same token final results will, of course, ultimately depend on his own personal efforts and hard work.

County Agents, Bureau of Reclamation Settlement Specialists and other State and Federal farm and agricultural bureau representatives are all cooperating—and glad to. They want the new homesteaders in Wyoming to be as far as is humanly possible 100% successful. They are behind the venture offering every help they can. But in the long run it is the farm-winner himself who has to turn his block of raw, uncleared land into the lush green acres of a going farm.

From the looks of things the veterans who have so far been lucky in the land drawings on the Bureau of Reclamation irrigation projects have been going great guns. Why not? Doc Haas and his little group of sturdy ex-Doughboys succeeded in 1921 over at Veteran, Wyoming. Succeeded the hard way without the benefit of advice and instruction from older settlers, and without any on-the-farm school-room help.

The land is there, thousands of acres of potentially rich agricultural soil. Getting water to it is, and will be a long time Government proposition. But as fast as irrigation projects progress, as fast as dams are built to impound the water, and canals and ditches are constructed to carry it to the thirsty land additional blocks of farm units in the public domain will be opened for homesteading by young Americans who have faith in the West as a land of boundless opportunity—and in their own ability to succeed at pioneering.

That is the sort of faith the earlier settlers possessed when they rumbled out over the uncharted plains and across the rugged Rockies in long trains of ox-drawn, jolting Conestoga wagons to write the first glorious chapter in the taming of the West. It is the sort of faith Doc Haas and the ex-Doughboys from World War I had when they petitioned the Union Pacific Railroad to name their new town—Veteran. It's an American heritage.

And it burns today, brighter than ever, in the breasts of the World War II pioneers who have already won, or hope to win their Government-gift farmsteads in the Riverton project or in the Heart Mountain irrigation district in colorful Wyoming. Sure there are changes in Wyoming. Cross country busses, instead of stagecoaches thunder along the main highways. Streamlined trains flash across the sage. Overhead transcontinental planes wing through the azure skies.

But the golden sunsets, the snow-high peaks that make Wyoming a land of grandeur as well as opportunity are still there. They'll *never* change.

Lee Mundy heads for a shoot-out showdown when he champions the cause of oppressed Indians in THE WAGES OF GREED, an exciting complete novelet by NORRELL GREGORY which is one of the many action-packed headliners coming next issue!

GAMBLER'S CHOICE

By
TOM PARSONS

When death's in the cards, Mel Dillon proves a killer needs finesse!

MELVIN CARDWELL DILLON stood admiring his own reflection in the mirror of the hotel room bureau. He stared at the thick dark hair with a touch of gray in it, the thin face, the heavy eyebrows, the neat mustache with the waxed and pointed ends, and then nodded.

"Quite a distinguished looking individual," Dillon said. "A man of importance among the lesser specimens of the human race."

"Sure," said the big, ugly faced man who sprawled in a chair across the room. "You're pretty as all get-out, Mel. But this is the thrivin' little cowtown called Festival and we came here to kill a man named Marsh Morton—remember?"

"Of course I remember," said Dillon. "But you still haven't told me what Morton has done to receive this singular honor, Carse?"

"How do I know?" Carse Sloan said. "I've never seen the man. All I know is I was hired by a hombre named Hank Pryor to kill this Marsh Morton."

"You put it so crudely," Dillon said as he slipped into his long black coat. "No wonder when I mentioned having heard of Morton and the dangerous bunch of cowboys he had riding for him —you thought you might be better off

The owner of the Double M fell forward across the desk

with a partner in this deal. So you talked me into working with you. I see now it is just as well. No finesse. Sometimes I wonder how you managed to live this long, Carse."

"The other feller died," said the big gunman. "That's how. I usually shoot first and fast. If a hombre gets a bullet in his back that's his fault for not facing in the other direction. I ain't so particular."

"While everybody begins suspecting you of the killing at once." The gambler shook his head sadly. "Were it not for the monetary angles involved I fear I would terminate our association posthaste. And with only one regret. That I did not see and talk to Hank Pryor. We have so much in common." Dillon smiled. "You might call us kindred spirits."

"Never mind about you're not seein' Pryor," said Sloan getting to his feet angrily. "You're not backin' out now, Dillon. We got five hundred dollars in advance for downin' Marsh Morton, and I gave you half of that money. We get another five hundred when we've done the job, and you better be around to help me earn that dinero."

"I have every intention of assisting you in my own quaint way," Dillon said dryly. "From the first I have felt this situation called for someone with brains."

DILLON had met Carse Sloan in a town fifty miles north of Festival along one of the cattle trails. The gambler had known the big gunman for some time and knew that Sloan's guns were always for hire. When Dillon had learned that Sloan had been hired by Hank Pryor to down Marsh Morton, the gambler had been very much interested.

It had not been hard for Dillon to make Sloan think he had been the one who had suggested that the gambler join forces with him. They had arrived in the town of Festival tonight looking for their intended victim. Neither man knew Morton by sight.

"That's better." Sloan dropped back into his chair. "I hate to have to get tough with you, Mel."

"It might be unfortunate," Dillon said. "Now listen, Carse. When we find Morton don't try anything foolish like shooting him in the back. We try to get him in a poker game in which we are both playing. No one in this town knows we are together. In the poker game you accuse me of cheating. You go for your gun—the gun catches and you accidentally kill Morton."

"Good." Sloan got to his feet. "I better get back to my own room down the hall. Got to be careful that no one sees us together."

"Right," said Dillon.

Sloan opened the door of the hotel room and peered up and down the passage. There was no one in the dingy second floor hall of the hotel. The big gunman glanced back at Dillon, nodded and then stepped out, closing the door silently behind him.

Dillon stood gazing at the closed door. Finally he reached beneath the left side of his coat, assured himself that the gun he wore in a shoulder holster was ready for a quick draw and then walked over to the bureau.

"Yes," he said. "I'd hate to have you get tough with me, too, Sloan."

He picked up his pearl gray Stetson, stared in the glass as he arranged the hat at just the right angle, and turned away from the bureau. He halted and stood motionless as he heard a soft knock on the outside of the door.

"Who is it?" he called.

"You don't know me," a man answered from outside. "But I'd like to see you on business, Mr. Dillon."

Dillon went to the door and drew it open. An elderly man who looked like a cattleman of the old school stood there in the hall. He had gray hair and a gray mustache.

"Come in." Dillon stepped back and the gray haired man stepped into the room. Dillon closed and locked the door. "What can I do for you?" he asked.

"I've heard about you. You are said to be a smart man and fast with a gun. I need protection—not from just any gunslick. I can hire plenty of those cheap. I'm looking for a man with brains and you may be that man, Dillon."

"What's your offer?" Dillon asked waving his visitor to a chair, and seating himself on the edge of the bed. "I just might be interested."

"A thousand dollars if you agree to protect me at all times and see that I'm not killed," the cattleman said.

"It's a deal," Dillon said. "Would you mind telling me your name?"

"Not at all." The gray haired man

smiled. "I'm Marsh Morton, owner of the Double M. Maybe you have heard of me?"

"Maybe I have," Dillon said a bit weakly. "And just what happens if you should be killed?"

"Simple," said Morton. "You don't get the money. I didn't say I would pay you in advance!" The ranch owner looked hard at the gambler. "You said it was a deal—but of course you can still refuse the job, Mr. Dillon."

"No, I'm sticking," Dillon said. "It was a deal—and in my profession when anyone deals I play out the hand." He frowned thoughtfully. "And now would you mind telling me why you feel your life is in such constant danger that you need a bodyguard?"

"Glad to tell you," Morton said. "As I mentioned, I own the Double M outfit about six miles south of Festival. It is a fairly large ranch. I have good stock and am doing all right. Reckon I would be plumb pleased with the world if it wasn't for Hank Pryor."

"What's he got to do with it?" Dillon asked as Morton rose from his chair and began to pace the floor.

"Everything," Morton said bitterly. "Up until a year ago me and Hank were neighbors and close friends. He owns the Turkey Track over north-east of my spread. Hank Pryor got the idea he wanted a bigger ranch so he offered to buy the Double M. I refused to sell and he got hopping mad about it. Hank always was quick tempered."

"You mean to say that Pryor wants you killed merely in the hope of getting your ranch?" Dillon asked in surprise.

"I do," said Morton. "Though Hank hasn't been fool enough to come right out and admit it. I haven't seen him lately, but his foreman, Joe Quinn has ridden over to my place a couple of times. Quinn warned me that I had better sell out fast if I want to live. He talked big until some of my men showed up, and then he left in a hurry."

THE ranch owner ducked instinctively as a bullet came in through the open window of the hotel room and missed his left ear by not more than two inches. It thudded into the wall. The sound of the rifle that had been fired from across the street was muffled by the distance.

Dillon leaped to his feet and blew out the oil lamp, plunging the room into darkness. He went to the window and peered out, the flat roof of a building across the street was in line with the window, but he could see no one there.

"See what I mean?" Marsh Morton's voice came calmly out of the darkness. "Someone must have spotted me here in yore room."

"Looks that way," Dillon said.

The lamp had been burning and the window open when he had been talking to Carse Sloan a little while ago. Dillon had glanced out and assured himself that anyone in the room couldn't have been seen from the street below. The building across the street and the one next to it had been dark and apparently deserted, so he had paid little attention to them. Now he wondered how long whoever had fired that shot at Morton had been waiting and watching.

"Maybe we better get out of here," Morton said. "That hombre with the rifle might start shootin' again. He just could hit one of us by accident."

"True," Dillon said. "Guess the safest place to be would be the saloon where there are plenty of people around. Do you play poker?"

"Nope," said Morton. "Never liked cards—and never gamble."

"In that case I'm afraid you will have to die tonight in order to stay alive," Dillon said.

"What are you talkin' about?" Morton sounded startled.

"You hired me to protect you, but I can't be certain that you won't stop a drygulcher's bullet as you nearly did a few moments ago," Dillon said. "I can try of course, but there is no way of being sure I will succeed. I have a plan in mind. Suppose we ride out to your ranch while we talk it over."

"All right," said Morton. "Let's go."

They stepped out into the deserted hall of the second floor of the hotel. Dillon locked the door of his room from the outside and thrust the key into his pocket. The two men went downstairs to the lobby. The night clerk was sitting behind the desk reading a newspaper.

Near the door leading out onto the street Carse Sloan was standing talking to a hard faced man dressed in range clothes. Morton frowned as he saw the man with the big gunman.

"That's Joe Quinn," the rancher said. "Don't know the big man with him."

Dillon said nothing as they walked by the two men and stepped out onto the street. Quinn and Sloan silently watched them. Dillon and Sloan had arrived in Festival on the Overland stage so had no horses. The gambler went to the livery stable and rented a saddle horse. Morton had left his horse at a hitching-rail in front of the saloon. He got the bay and joined Dillon.

The gambler saw that Quinn was now standing in front of the hotel watching them as they rode out of town. Sloan had disappeared. Dillon suspected that the big gunman had gone to the livery stable to get a horse. Dillon was sure Sloan and Quinn would follow them out to the Double M and it was just what he wanted to happen.

On the way to the ranch the gambler talked long and earnestly, and Marsh Morton listened intently. When Dillon had finished the ranchman nodded.

"Sounds like it should work," Morton said. "No harm in trying it anyway. I'll have to tip off the men in my outfit to keep out of the way if they hear shooting."

They reached the ranch and Morton talked to his men in the bunkhouse and then went up to the ranchhouse. The owner of the Double M was a widower with no children, or even close relatives.

Morton lighted an oil lamp that stood on a high shelf on the wall. The ranchhouse living room was comfortably furnished and evidently the rancher used it for his office—for there was a big flat topped desk in one corner of the room.

Dillon dropped into a chair, drew his gun and calmly unloaded it. He reloaded from a box he took from his pocket.

"Been carrying those around for a long time," he said, smiling at Morton. "Always thought they would come in handy sometime."

He thrust the gun back into the shoulder holster and got to his feet. He glanced casually out of the nearest window. Two shadowy forms were moving stealthily toward the ranchhouse. Dillon did not reveal the fact he had seen anyone by the slightest change of expression.

"They're here," he said in a low tone, turning to Morton.

The owner of the Double M was seated at his desk glancing over some papers. He had taken off his hat and he looked tired and worried. Evidently the constant realization that he might be shot and killed at any moment was a great strain.

DILLON heard a footstep in the hall outside the living room.

"You made a mistake, Morton," Dillon said loudly. "When you hired me—you hired the wrong man. You are worth more to me dead than alive."

He suddenly drew his gun. Morton uttered a startled exclamation and reached into a drawer of the desk as though seeking a gun there. Dillon's gun roared.

The owner of the Double M suddenly fell forward across the desk and sprawled there motionless.

"So you got him, Mel," Carse Sloan said from behind Dillon. "I wondered when and how you were going to do it." The big gunman looked at Quinn, as the foreman of the Turkey Track stood beside him. "Now you can pay us that other five hundred you owe us, Pryor."

"Pryor?" Dillon said. "You mean this man told you he was Hank Pryor, Carse?"

"He did—when he gave me that first five hundred of the thousand he was willing to pay for havin' Marsh Morton killed," said Sloan. "Why? Ain't he Pryor?"

"He is not," said Dillon. "He's Pryor's foreman, Joe Quinn."

"What difference does it make?" Quinn demanded. "Pryor has been sick for the past couple of months and I have been runnin' things for him. I know he wanted this spread and figgered if we got rid of Morton we could buy it cheap. The boss told me he was going to make me his partner if he had a big ranch."

"Then Pryor had nothing to do with these attempts on Morton's life," said Dillon. "Is that it, Quinn?"

"That's right," said Quinn. "It was my idea and my money. I wasn't taking chances though. Thought that Sloan might slip up on the job so I tried to get Morton with a rifle when I saw him in a hotel room tonight. Never did see who the other man was in that room."

Two Double M cowboys had appeared quietly behind Sloan and Quinn and were covering them with their guns. The two gunmen did not even know the cowboys were there.

Dillon reached into his pocket and

(Concluded on page 154)

A Book Bargain ROUNDUP

by TEX MUMFORD

THE voice of the creek pouring through the canyon is muffled by the first layer of ice. Your traplines are set. Your stable and cabin chinked against the wild winds of a forty-below snow blow! There's a keg of wild grape wine in a warm corner of the woodshed; the carcass of a fat elk hung up in another, stretchers all ready for the winter's catch of pelts; and you can lie on the bunk and mentally picture the exact spot in which each of your traps lies. But you can't do that every evening all winter. So, if you haven't already done it, don't forget on your last trip to town before you get snowbound to stock up with a load of those top-hand 25c reprint Westerns. At two-bits a copy you can afford enough to keep you in reading till the spring melt, and to help you in your picking, some of the latest good ones are listed-below!

GUNSIGHT TRAIL by Alan LeMay

In the days when the great American Southwest was as remote from civilization as Tibet is today, and their social organization almost as feudal as in the times of the bespeared, horseborne iron knights of the middle ages, Earl Shaw aspired to be the overlord of the rich cattle country contained in Buckhorn Valley with its center in the town of Dobie Wells.

There was nothing in Shaw's character to prevent him from taking this country. He had all the elements of ruthlessness and unscrupulousness necessary for such a venture. The one little flaw in the picture lay in the fact that Oliver Major, owner of the Lazy M ranch and his son Dick, while quite amenable to reason, had a common characteristic of the average American—they didn't like to be pushed around.

The affair really gets hot when a wandering puncher reports the murder of the Buckhorn Valley Sheriff in Crazy Mule Canyon. By this time Shaw has managed to get enough political power to have elected a hand-picked sheriff who attempts to put both Oliver and Dick Major under arrest for the killing.

Then the would-be cattle-baron hires an army of gunfighters and lays siege to the Lazy M. At this point Clay Hughes, the puncher who had discovered the sheriff's body, takes a hand and engages in a death-tempting gamble for the freedom of the valley. *Gunsight Trail* is packed with excitement. Put it first on your list.

THE DEPUTY AT SNOW MOUNTAIN by Edison Marshall

This story has an amazing situation in which a man is commissioned to track down and arrest himself for a brutal murder that was committed by someone else. Jailed for getting back his own money at gunpoint from a crooked roulette dealer who had cheated him, Jim Logan escapes and hits for the cold, high-lonesome of the Western ranges. There he watches from a distance while a tough sent by Bull McQuire, the outlaw boss of Snow Mountain, pushes Marshal Tom Turner, the man who was trailing Jim, over a cliff. In the act of trying to save the marshal Jim is badly hurt, his face horribly mutilated. Jim realizes that he will be blamed for the murder.

But this series of bad breaks, discouraging enough to send a less courageous man scurrying for parts unknown, only fills Jim with a determination to clear his name and make a triple-tested comeback in the land where hard luck had befallen him. Edison Marshall is a man who knows his Western country from away back, as well as the salty characters who saw it with the rough side out. How Jim Logan goes about this seemingly impossible undertaking, he has worked out with great skill and vigor.

WILD HORSE VALLEY by W. C. Tuttle

W. C. Tuttle is an author beloved by all Western fiction fans. His irrepressible humor, his clever plots, the rapid movement of his line of story action, and his first-hand understanding of cow-country character that bring his cowboys, Western Sheriffs and all the others to life on the page—all keep him in the front rank of best-selling Western writers.

In Wild Horse Valley he has concocted one of his inimitable half-whacky half-serious stories, in which Tonto County elects a former vaudeville actor named Henry Conroy to the

office of sheriff as a sort of a joke. But when Conroy's election is almost immediately followed by the most hair-raising crime wave that the county has ever experienced the joke doesn't seem so funny—either to the citizens or to Henry. In this one your tears will be more of laughter than of sadness, but we'll guarantee it for excitement all the way through.

●

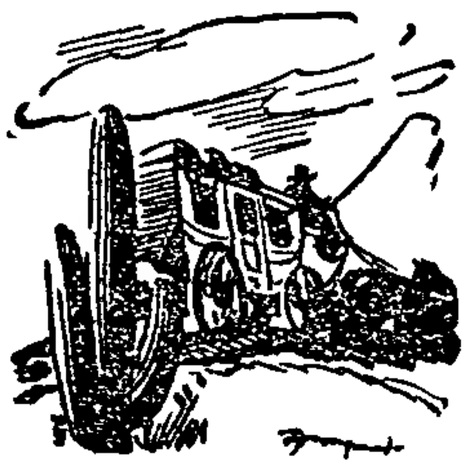
ARIZONA JIM by Charles Alden Seltzer

For a generation Charles Alden Seltzer's full-bodied novels of Western romance and adventure have been thrilling readers with their fighting fare of strong action as well as blood-stirring love. No greater enthusiast for the Western epic than Charles Alden Seltzer has ever written, and none has ever put more vitality and punch into his writing.

Arizona Jim is the story of a fighting parson and a cow-country girl whose battle against Flash Haddam and the other blackguards of Red Rock who were polluting the rangeland with their inhuman methods of doing business, reaches almost the proportions of a war.

The fighting preacher from Tombstone and the courageous daughter of the H-BAR-H ranch, put on a real show. And it's topped off by a surprise that rocks the Red Rock country almost off its outlaw bolstered base—and may rock you plumb out of your chair.

Answers to Questions on Page 133



1. Ford was shot and killed in Creede, Colorado, the silver-boom town built in a canyon so narrow it contained only one street.
2. He killed 4280 bison in 18 months while supplying meat for the construction crews of the Kansas Pacific Railroad.
3. The first man to see the wonderful geysers, hot springs and waterfalls was John Colter. But Jim Bridger, the famous old scout, was Yellowstone's biggest booster.
4. Having heard that white men greeted their women with kisses, the entire tribe fell upon Mrs. Whitman and nearly smothered her with noisy kisses. She recovered from this experience, but was killed, with her husband, some years later by less friendly Indians.
5. Ben Holladay, described as "illiterate, coarse, boastful, false and cunning," but also as "brave, strong, aggressive, talented and generous." He built the Overland Mail and ran his stages through summer and blizzard, Indian attack and war until he sold out to Wells, Fargo in 1866 for $1,800,000.

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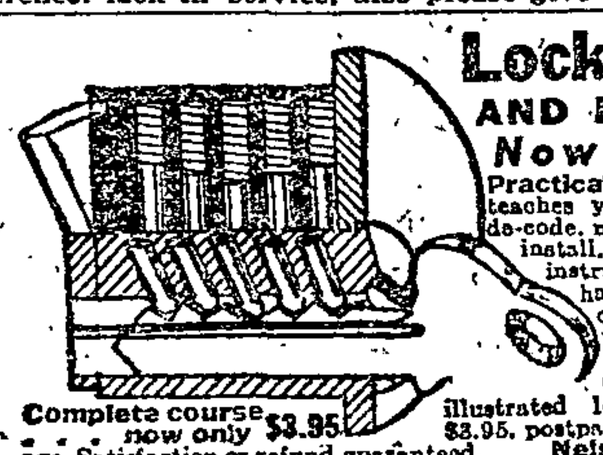

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GAMBLER'S CHOICE

(Concluded from page 151)

drew out a roll of bills and handed them to Sloan. "Here's the two hundred and fifty dollars you gave me as my share of the first payment on killing Morton," he said. "I never did intend to earn that money. Just thought that if I would string along with you, Carse, I might find some way of helping a man I didn't even know to live longer."

"But you did kill Morton," protested Sloan. "I saw you shoot him."

"No, he didn't." Marsh Morton suddenly sat up. "I'm still alive—thanks to Dillon loading his gun with blank cartridges." The ranch owner looked years younger. "Now that I know that my old friend Hank Pryor didn't really aim to kill me I feel much better."

"So do I," said Dillon. "Hank Pryor happens to be my uncle. His hiring a gunman to get you certainly didn't sound like him—which was why I was so willing to come along with Sloan and see what was back of it all."

"Shucks, why didn't Hank say something about getting a partner instead of trying to buy the Double M," said Morton. "I'll see him first thing in the morning and talk to him about forming a partnership and combining the two spreads. You come along, Dillon. Reckon Hank will be glad to see you."

Sloan and Quinn grabbed for their guns, and then changed their minds when the two Double M cowboys prodded Colt barrels in their backs.

"Just like I've told you from the first, Carse," Dillon said. "Too crude. No finesse!"

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A SKIN GAME

How Early-Day Trappers Were Exploited

By BUCK BENSON

THERE were profits in the fur trade, but as happens in these things, the profits did not often go to the men who did the work. The Indians were outrageously cheated—many valuable skins going for some cheap trinket. But even the white trappers were shamelessly exploited by the companies who outfitted them, or for whom they worked.

For example, when Kit Carson signed up as a trapper in his younger days at Taos, his meagre outfit put him in debt to this extent:

1 saddle mule	30 plews
1 Spanish saddle	40 plews
1 capote, Hudson's Bay	8 plews
Galena lead (for bullets)	1 plew
3 feet of twist tobacco	1 plew
6 traps	24 plews

Thus, simply to pay off these meagre tools, Kit Carson had to deliver 104 skins before he could begin to realize anything for himself.

Carson quickly freed himself of this bondage, however, and organized the free trappers, who worked for no company. They bought their own supplies, trapped any territory they pleased and sold to the highest bidder. While some free trappers worked in small groups, or alone, Carson's outfit was organized into a considerable company which shared the work of making camp, taking care of horses and guard duty, but which retained individual possession of the furs each man trapped.

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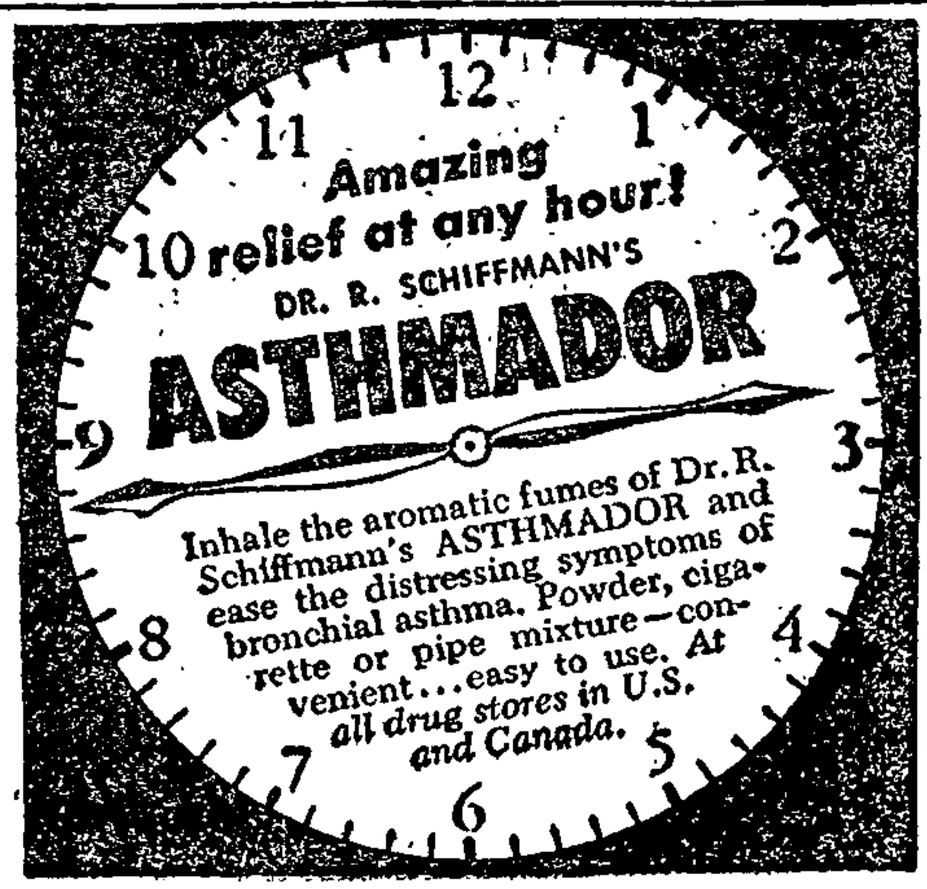
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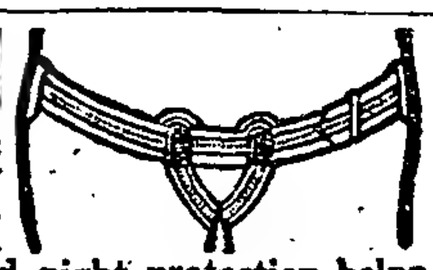

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The BIGGEST FIRE *in the* WORLD

A True Story of the Plains

By TEX GAINSVILLE

THE burning of Rome was small stuff compared to the fire set by the Army in the Nebraska territory in 1864. This fire, for sheer magnitude, was probably the largest fire in the world.

Towards the close of the Civil War, the Cheyennes, with few army troops to harass them, had things pretty much their own way on the plains. Nebraska, Kansas and eastern Colorado were their hunting grounds and in this huge territory no white man was safe. Stage lines and wagon trains were blocked and all transportation came to a halt.

Even the mail could not get through.

General Mitchell, military commander in the West, was ordered to reopen the trails and lift the siege of the Western settlements, which were completely cut off from the east. However, no forces at his disposal could do the job, for the Cheyennes, splendid fighters and good stragetists, were unbeatable on their own grounds by any normal number of troops.

So Mitchell came up with a drastic, deadly plan. He wired every fort and outpost from Fort Kearny, Nebraska, to Denver City.

He ordered out all troops and civilians along a 300 mile front, with instructions to be ready to set the praire on fire!

The wind was not right, but on January 27, 1865, it swung to the northwest and the moment was right. The word was flashed at dusk. Immediately troopers, ranchers, hunters, trappers, cowboys and every man available started out on horseback with lighted bundles of straw bouncing along behind their steeds. They galloped, drag-

ging these flaming brands which were setting fire to the grass behind them, until they met the man riding in the opposite direction. In an appallingly short time, an inferno 300 miles long was raging southward!

Three days later the roaring holocaust was 225 miles south, on the bank of the Arkansas river. It jumped the river and tore on, disappearing into the panhandle of Texas. Behind it was left a blackened waste, burned clear of all game and grass and trees.

Perhaps not many Indians were killed in the fire because they knew how to set backfires. But all game was either destroyed or wiped out and the Indian's ability to live off the country was destroyed with it. That broke the Cheyennes' power to wage war. The result was to force them north into the mountains of Wyoming and clear the plains.

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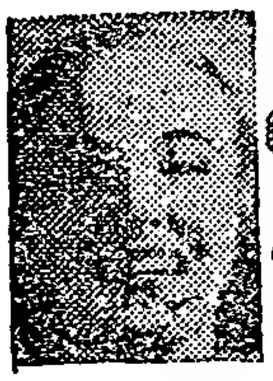

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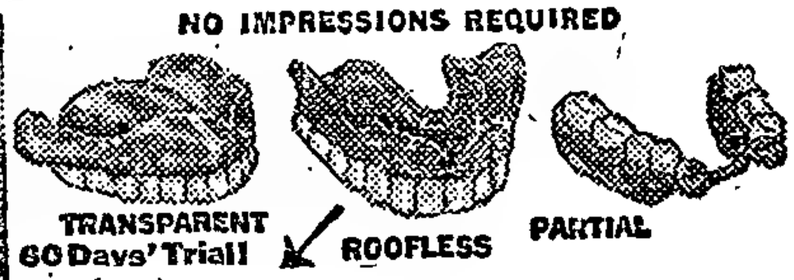

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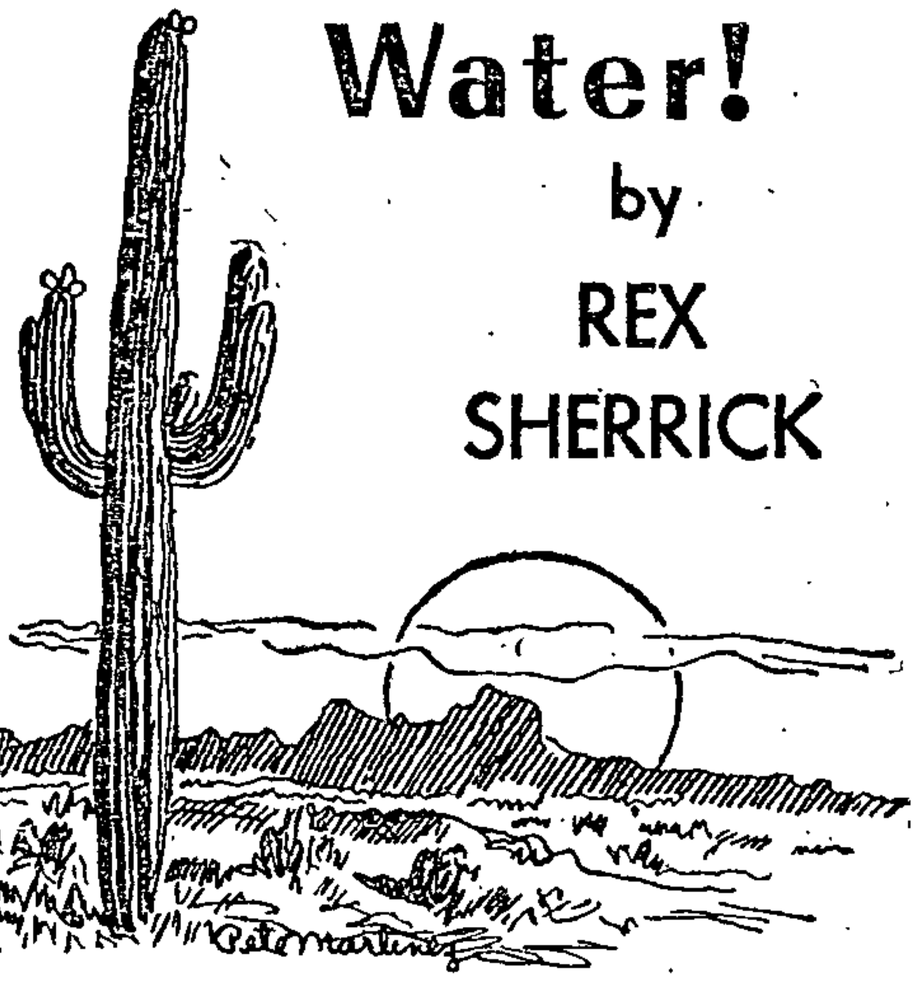

AN ERA OF IRRIGATION BEGINS!

THE West is a semi-arid country and first surveyors of this vast domain did not believe anything could be grown or raised there. Accident taught early stockmen that the dried grasses were nutritious. Experiment taught the Mormons of Utah that the sandy uplands were fertile—if they could only be irrigated.

The discovery touched off a vast program of ditch digging throughout the west. Everybody began digging. Companies were organized to finance irrigation projects and stock was sold in huge blocks. There was the usual amount of swindled customers, the normal amounts of "watered" stock. But the ditches grew.

Horace Greeley, the famed editor, organized a company to found a colony in Colorado. Thousands of investors put all their money into the venture. Nathan Cook Meeker, representing him, bought 12,000 acres of land for $60,000 in a parched spot close to the joining of South Platte and Cache La Poudre rivers.

When the first load of settlers arrived, fifty strong, in May, 1870, they found themselves "a part and parcel of the Great American Desert."

Some pulled out, but others, who didn't have the fare home, stayed and dug ditches. The town of Greeley boomed and the rest of Colorado, seeing the impossible performed, began to dig like gophers. The era of irrigation had arrived!

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THE TALLY BOOK

(Continued from page 8)

beef herd getting in from the south. So when the trail herd, blinded and desperate in the storm, hit his south fence, Lee was pleasantly surprised.

He saddled his horse and got out there in a hurry to find a freezing herd, some cowboys trying to cut his fence and a desperate owner—who was a girl! It wasn't the Indians' herd at all.

The plot, as the old-timers say, thickened. It was still further thickened by a crook named Bond, who had tried to rope him in on a deal to cheat the Indians a little more. This is a fine fast novelet you won't want to miss—THE WAGES OF GREED, by Norrell Gregory.

A Boo Boo Bounce Yarn

In the short story corral we've got GOOD CHEER AND NO MISTAKE, a Boo-Boo Bounce story by your old friend Ben Frank. Boo-Boo Bounce, the fat sheriff of Coyote County, U.S.A., decides it is time to spread cheer and kindness to one and all, and not go through life being an old sour-face. So Boo-Boo and Hopewell begin spreading kindness. You can guess what happens. Everybody figures the two boys have been eating loco weed and some of the citizens come down on them like a bucking bronc. There are some hilarious complications before things are straightened out and many a laugh.

For a special feature article we've got PINT SIZE HOMESTEADS by John A. Thompson, a writer who has made a study of the homestead deal as it stands today.

"A lot of people," orates author Thompson, "are still unaware of the fact that Uncle Sam, the biggest landholder in the West, has a pint size homestead proposition available involving small five acre tracts on a five year lease basis."

If you're interested in a farm or ranch as small as five acres, we recommend this instructive little piece on what to do and how to do it. There may be some land out thar yonder, friends.

[*Turn page*]

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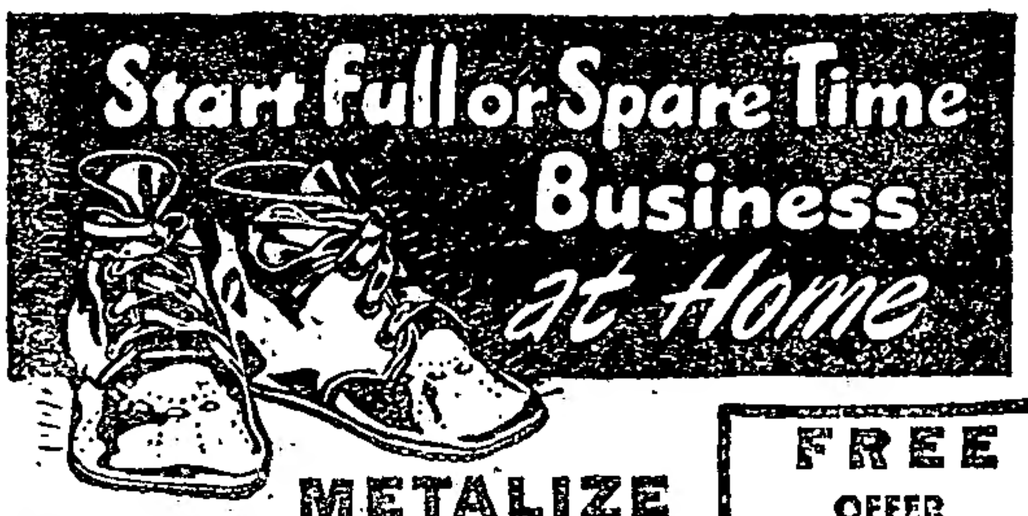

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THE MAIL BAG

THE latch string is still out for you folks who want to drop the old Ramrod a line and see your name in print. We're plumb anxious to know which stories you like a heap, which you like not so much and which you didn't like. All that helps us to pick better stories for you, so don't be bashful, speak up. Like this gent:

I got a bang out of the letter by Chet Summers in the August number, asking that GIANT WESTERN be made twice as big as it is. I agree with the lad. I think you should mount each copy of the magazine on wheels, so we could just roll it away from the newsstand.

—*John Lavolle, Madison, Wisc.*

All right, John, you're stringing us. But all the same we take it as a mighty fine compliment that big as GIANT WESTERN is, so many folks wish it were bigger and are sorry to turn the last page. That means they're getting

(Concluded on page 162)

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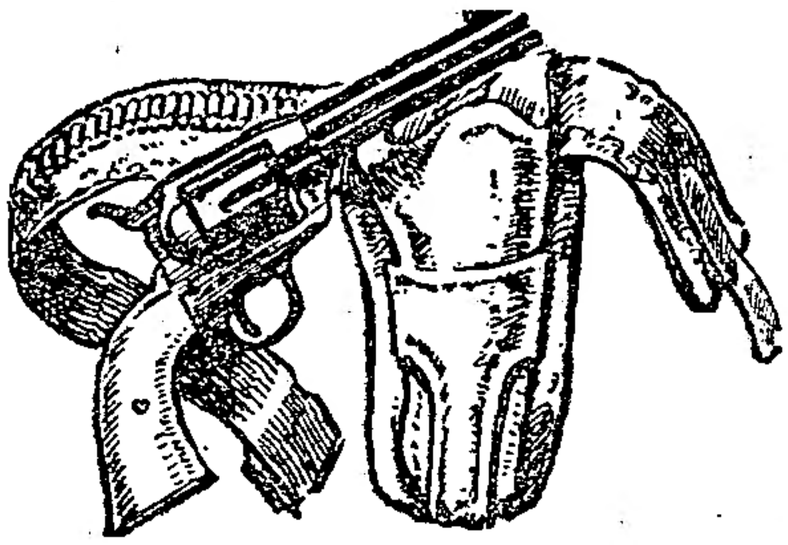
Barb Wire Barricade

The Fencing of the Range

By SAM BRANT



CONTRARY to popular belief, it was not the farmers who first began fencing the range. It was the big cattleman, who began to fence off huge tracts of public land, which he considered his range because he had always used it, to keep settlers out.

This fencing became so extensive that many of the wires actually blocked roads and practically isolated towns, making stagecoaches take crazy corkscrew paths to reach their destinations.

In Colorado, some thirty or so cattlemen had fenced off 2,640,450 acres as their own! In Wyoming, Laramie County had become almost completely fenced and posted property.

By 1885 there were 193 protests against these illegal fencings at the Department of Interior. As a result, the Secretary of Interior, Henry Teller, made public a statement in which he said that settlers were legally entitled to cut any fence which blocked entrance to their land. The result was a wave of bitter conflict.

In August, 1885, President Cleveland issued an order to ranchers to take down all unauthorized fences on public land and sent a troop of soldiers to Cheyenne to enforce the order. But the soldiers were never needed. The cattle boom had meanwhile collapsed, prices were falling like autumn leaves, the range was over-grazed and drought had set in. And the next winter began the disastrous blizzard of 1886-1887 which finished off the big ranches and wiped out two-thirds of the cattle in the north.

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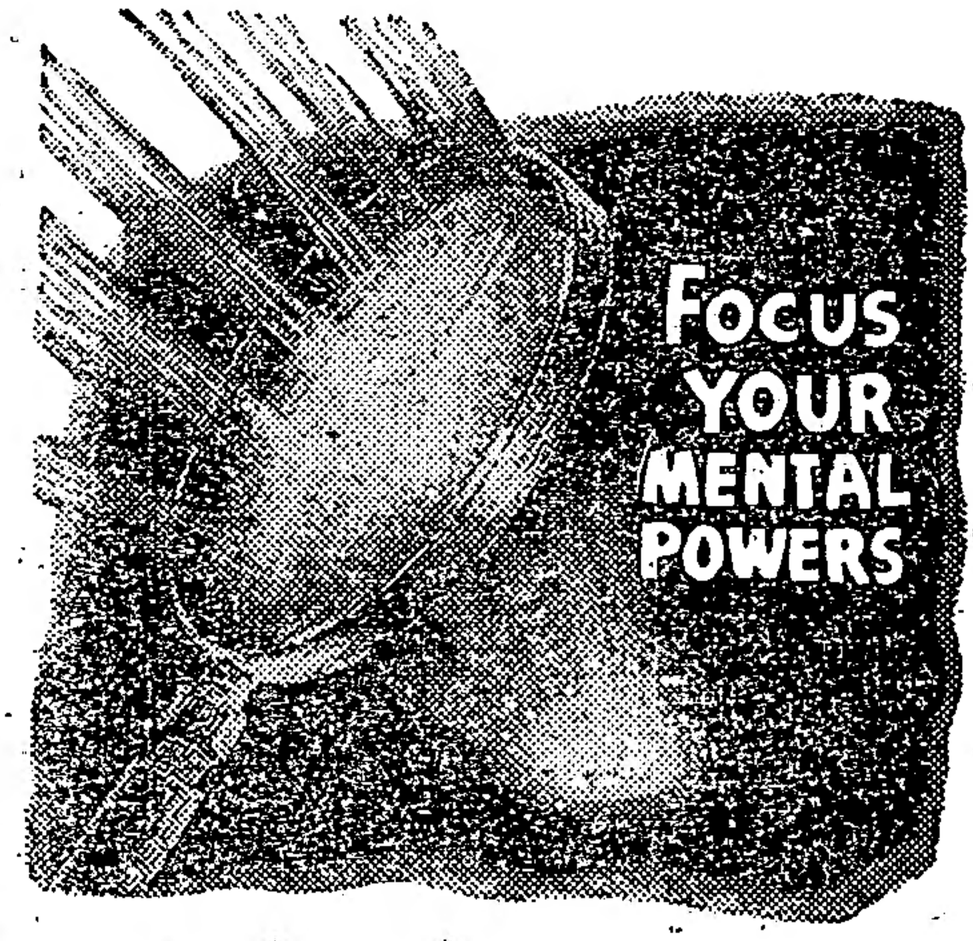

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THE TALLY BOOK

(Concluded from page 160)

real solid reading enjoyment out of the magazine and that's just what we want.

Here's the way I'd rate the stories in the October issue: First, THE TRAIL TO PEACH MEADOW CANYON, Second is a tie between SORRY SID'S KETCH DOG and THE WALL OF SILENCE, both of them top grade western jobs. In fact, the only reason I put PEACH MEADOW ahead of them is because it was the main story. After that comes GUARD OF HONOR, and then AIN'T SCIENCE WONDERFUL. The others were okay but not quite as good. The Bechdolt articles are okay, but personally I'm getting tired of reading about the same outlaws all the time. I think the stories are much better than this kind of article, always playing up some gunman. —*James Watson, Pueblo, Colo.*

Okay, Jimmy, that's the kind of letter we like—right out of the feed box. So you like the stories, but are getting kinda tired of the biographies of gunmen. Thasso? Well, let's have a few more votes from outside and see what the other people think. We're eager to know and willing to listen.

THE TRAIL TO PEACH MEADOW CANYON was a good story and I know it's true too. I've heard of Ben Curry and his Wild Bunch and I saw Mike Bastian once a long time ago. He was all man, that boy.
—*Harry Byers, Los Angeles, Cal.*

All we can say, Mr. Byers is that we are plumb flabbergasted. And we're wondering just how you could have heard of Ben Curry and met Mike Bastian when they are just fictional characters and author Jim Mayo made them up right out of his head? But you know, we're not so surprised at that, for the author made his characters so vivid and real and believable that your error is quite understandable. But we don't think they did exist, anywhere, though there must have been plenty of veteran characters something like them. We take it you enjoyed the gang.

Well folks, that'll be all from the Ramrod. Thanks for listening to my palaver. Let's hear from you, huh? A letter or even a postcard. Just address it to me—The Ramrod, GIANT WESTERN Magazine, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y. Be glad to hear from you. —THE RAMROD